

THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE

John Grant
'Has Anyone Here
Seen Kristie?'

Graham Joyce
Jonathan Lethem
Russell Hoban
Lyndsay Clarke

Daniel Kaysen
Joel Lane
Jeremy Minton
Al Robertson
Damian Kilby



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INTERZONE BECOMES A TTA PRESS MAGAZINE

You will no doubt have heard by now that David Pringle has retired as editor/publisher of *Interzone*, and that he asked us if we'd like to take over. We didn't have to think about it very long before saying yes. Issue 193, David's last, has just been published, and the magazine becomes a TTA Press title from issue 194, out in a couple of months and published to a bimonthly schedule thereafter.

David Pringle has been editor/publisher of *Interzone* for an incredible 22 years, and has launched the careers of a generation of SF/Fantasy authors. It's an awesome achievement, especially when you consider he and his team have done it independently, and some act to follow, but we're looking forward to the challenge! We've been working hard on new content for the magazine, with some exciting stories lined up, some new features to join David Langford's 'Ansible Link' and Nick Lowe's 'Mutant Popcorn'; and with the tireless assistance of Edward Noon we have artwork and design that will blow you away. Above left is a black and white thumbnail of IZ:194's cover. It looks spectacular in colour.

If you're already an *Interzone* subscriber you'll be receiving all your issues as normal, the only difference being that when it's time to renew you'll have to do so with us and not David Pringle. If you haven't quite got round to subscribing before, perhaps you'll consider doing so now. *Interzone* has been added to the TTA Press subscription form and the secure online store on the website (<http://www.ttapress.com/onlinestore1.html>), and new subscriptions will begin with issue 194 (or the current issue if placed at a later date).

SUCCESS . . . AND HOW TO AVOID IT

Some of you have been waiting a very long time for Mat Coward's *Success . . . And How To Avoid It*. Too long. I'm very sorry about that. I won't go into all the various set-backs suffered, but this book is now ready to go to press (again – the first version was lost in a computer glitch and the back-up copy turned out to be blank . . . I know, I know . . .) and that all of you who have pre-ordered this book – many thanks for your patience! – will get your *personally signed* copy in September. This version has cartoons by Rob Kirbyson and a new colour cover by the talented Edward Noon, and it is without doubt one of the funniest, most useful books on writing you'll ever read.

THE ABSINTHE TTA37

Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time, to print each of TTA's tenth anniversary issues on seasonally coloured paper. In case you were wondering why I thought white was an appropriate colour for Spring, this is what happened . . . We did a small test run on each of the four chosen colours, and the Spring paper, 'siskin green', looked fine, so we went ahead and printed the issue. Afterwards, when faced with 64 graphically intensive pages, and not having realised just how much the green paper would affect even the darkest shade of black, I decided that it might be too difficult to read, or even look at for more than a few seconds at a time: it had a slightly luminous tint I hadn't noticed on the test print. So we reprinted the issue on the normal white paper and sent those copies out instead.

Meanwhile, some people still wanted to own one of the green copies, by now christened 'the absinthe issue' by a visitor to the website's discussion forum, so we pulped all but 120 of them and are now offering these *special limited edition collectors' items* to you for a fiver (or ten euros/dollars) each. If you want one of these rare beasts just send your money to the usual place. All proceeds go towards the TTA37 reprint fund.

As you've already gathered, none of the other 2004 issues will be printed on the planned coloured paper . . .

GRAHAM JOYCE

Graham has written this issue's guest editorial, opposite. The paperback of his most recent novel *The Facts of Life* is out in June (US) and November (UK), and his next novel *The Limits of Enchantment* is published in January (UK) and March (US) 2005. For more details visit Graham's website at www.grahamjoyce.net, and if you want to talk to him you can do so via his message board on TTA's online discussion forum at www.ttapress.com/discus.

Have to agree with Liz Williams's recent editorial. New Weird is really just the same Old Peculiar we've been getting smashed on for years. It's the delicious, dark morbidity, you see. And we might as well settle for the fact that not everyone has the taste for this yeasty stuff. The first time I was dosed with the highly habit-forming Old Peculiar properly was at school, and that day the trickster-publican of the hoary ghost-inn was passing himself off as an English teacher. You'll have to forgive me, but it was the fine old Scottish ballad 'The Twa Corbies' that did it, and it bears reprinting here, and what's more I insist you read it aloud to yourself right now:

As I was walking all alane,
I heard twa corbies makin' a mane;
The tane unto the t'other did say,
"Where shall we gane an' dine the day?"
"In behind yon auld fail dyke,
I wot there lies a new-slain knight;
An' naebody kens that he lies there
But his hawk, his hound an' his lady fair.
"His hound is to the huntin's gane,
His hawk to fetch the wild fowl hame,
His lady's ta'en another mate,
So we may mak our dinner sweet.
"Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,
An' I'll pike oot his bonny blue een,
Wi' ae lock o' his gowden hair
We'll theek our nest when it grows bare.
"Mony a one for him maks mane,
But nane shall ken where he is gane;
O'er his white banes when they are bare
The wind shall blow for evermair".

Evermair. Macabre and chilling as this tale is, some teacher decided it was medicine for schoolkids, and even Great Literature claims a drop or two. (This poem has appeared in editions of *The Oxford Book Of English Verse* from the first Quiller-Couch onwards.) It is ghoulish, certainly. But I wonder why it is that what some folk disdain as morbidity is a quality I and others find eternally satisfying.

That quality being the same thing that every subscriber to TTA looks for. It's the suggestion of another world behind the obvious one, the world known only to the wind and the ravens. It is the job of the poem here to offer a special dispensation to the reader, the startled eavesdropper on the bird-talk, to be offered a rare glimpse into this other world, a world which triumphs over the material wealth and mortal flesh of the slain knight. It's quasi-religious, this yearning for insight into these other worlds, and yet it wants no doctrine or orthodoxy. What's more, behind it all there is an exciting plot, a thrilling paranoia in the revelation that only the knight's hawk, hound and his lady fair know where the body lies. And his lady fair, having taken another mate, is not telling.

There's the story, and then there is what's *behind* the story.

I was recently interviewed by a magazine that asked for my views on whether genre – Old Peculiar – should be taken more seriously. Obviously I didn't say what the reviewer wanted to hear. The fact is I think that anyone who parts with the cover price of a new book or a subscription to this magazine for example is already taking it as seriously as anyone could possibly want. I can't spend my time worrying about those who don't. Anyway sadly, somehow, the article came out as yet another whine about not being taken seriously.

But who are these po-faced 'serious' readers we're all supposed to be chasing? All authors want more readers (beware the author's ego, like the rowdy shareholders of a global capitalist economy demanding growth and muttering darkly about expansion: don't we love it every time we get translated into a new market. Growth! Returns!). Of course we do. But spare us the earnest sobriety of the relentlessly serious. I work hard for a bit of levity, and to paraphrase the words of my old friend John Jarrold, if they don't like a draught of Old Peculiar, and if they prefer not to drink in our company at the Tavern Of The Slain Knight, then fuck 'em.

On the contrary, on a good night at the inn we joke about morbidity. There are those amongst us who might know where the body lies, and who appreciate the sound that the wind makes in the trees. We return there again and again because it affords us a glimpse of shimmering worlds deeper and more timeless than this occluded and immediate one, and because it is strangely comforting to construct a nest of what we find in these stories. Because we are the ravens, and we will make our dinner sweet.



HAS ANYONE HERE SEEN KRISTIE? JOHN GRANT

As he came into Edinburgh he felt like a piece of bleached driftwood cast ashore at the edge of an ocean of night.

He lifted his gaze from the book he hadn't been reading to watch the flares of the city streaming by outside the train window, ever slowing now, and caught sight of his own transparent reflection in the glass. His eyes, haunted by this glimpse of their ghostly otherselves, shifted instantly away, refocusing themselves on the neon and the headlamps, the boxy shinings of windows, the crouching orange glow of street lights. It seemed that Edinburgh was trying to welcome him into her arms and yet at the same time couldn't put it out of her mind that he was an alien here, some creature accidentally strayed in from a wrong world.

This sensation of not belonging in wherever he was, like a theatrical prop inadvertently left in the middle of the stage after the scene had been changed, had become commonplace to him over the past eleven months, but he'd hoped Edinburgh at Festival time would be different. In a city full of strangers, surely there'd be a communion brought about by shared exile. That wasn't the sense, though, that the lights were giving him.

As he hauled his solitary bag down from the rack, he tried yet again to reckon how long it had been since last he'd visited the city. It had been a family vacation during his childhood, but he couldn't remember exactly how old he'd been. With the insouciance of youth, he hadn't really registered Edinburgh as anything except just another of those cities through which his parents insisted on dragging him, occasionally letting him off the leash long enough that he could escape into the nearest Woolworths to buy the same cheap plastic crap he could have bought round the corner in London. He had dim memories of the Castle – boring – of Arthur's Seat – boring – of the Calton Hill Observatory – boring – and so on, but he could recall nothing of the *feel* of Edinburgh, of the unique set of characteristics every city has that sets it apart from all other cities.

Climbing out onto the platform at Waverley, he had the curious sensation of simultaneously remembering it and discovering it for the first time. He could tell there were differences, but he had nothing in his mental picture gallery against which to compare the scene and thereby identify the modernisations. He paused momentarily in the middle of the platform, almost setting his case down beside him but then having second thoughts and retaining it, while the sluggish stream of his weary fellow-travellers divided around him. Kids too tired from the journey to be excited any more, having left their curiosity for the new somewhere along the endless railway track behind them; businessmen and -women clutching the sleek laptops on which they'd whiled away the miles in

First Class officiously playing Tetris; a bunch of lethargically drunken Hibs supporters returning from who knew what lost away fixture; a young pregnant woman fussing over a sleeping baby sprawled oblivious in its buggy, drool dangling. The clangour these people made seemed muffled by the echoing din of the station's space. They were just projections on a cinema screen onto which he'd stamped his own stubborn silhouette. He was conscious that the projector must be playing their colours over him, too, but he could feel nothing of that.

One thing that hadn't changed was the traffic chaos at the front of the station. Big black taxis, like London ones, had to make a loop down from the street to tend the impatient, overladen line of waiting passengers, and in so doing they jostled with the private cars performing the same manoeuvre to pick up friends and relatives but taking far longer over it because of course there were huggings and kissings to be done, kids to be complimented on how much they'd grown and how much they looked like their relevant parent, before the jollity-crammed cars could lurch back into the traffic maelstrom and out of the station complex. Adding to the confusion were occasional pedestrians dodging through the fray to and from the Menzies newsstand on the far side of it all to fetch copies of the *Evening News* or emergency packs of cigarettes.

He joined the queue for taxis and, like everyone else, dourly shuffled along his bag with his feet, a laboured yard or so at a time, until at last he was hoisting himself into the polish-smelling rear of a cab.

He'd booked himself a room weeks before, via the internet, in a bed & breakfast out on Mayfield Gardens. The booking of the room had committed him to coming to the Festival in a way that even the buying of the train tickets hadn't, and Derek had hung over his shoulder all the time he'd been doing it. If it hadn't been for Derek's insistence, he might not have come here. If it hadn't been for Derek's insistence, his life might have been lost. As it still could be.

"It's just before the corner of Mayfield Gardens and Suffolk Road," he told the driver, hoping he sounded like a local so the man wouldn't be tempted to drive the gullible tourist half-way round the city on the way there.

"I know where it is," said the driver over his shoulder. "Mrs Melrose keeps a clean place . . ." And he went into a monologue about the many virtues of Mrs Melrose until in the end his passenger began to wonder if it must be a brothel or an opium den.

In the middle of the night he awoke in a huge, almost too comfortable bed with the taste of Helen on his lips. His erection

was painful. Even as he struggled into consciousness, he ejaculated, gasping hoarsely into the soft black air of the bedroom – gasps that soon became dry sobs.

The vestiges of his dream clung all around him. He imagined he could see them as wispy grey feathers floating in the darkness. He had been dreaming of Helen, but surely it had been too real to be a dream. They'd been back in their bedroom in the flat they'd shared in West Hampstead. A nothing-special day. Nothing special, either, in the fact that they were making love, except that it was always special when they made love. At the start of the dream he'd been lying naked on their bed reading a detective novel, the warmth of the sunlight that poured in the window splashing across his thighs and loins, warming them, so that his penis was full and large, though not hard. She'd come up beside him, dressed only in her briefs – it was the long hot summer they'd survived together in London. She'd put her hands up to pull her long yellow hair back behind her ears, denuding her breasts, deliberately flaunting their taut, cherry-pink nipples at him, her mouth twitching into a coquettish smile, playing the shy strumpet for him. He'd reached up his free hand to take one of hers, interleaving his fingers with hers, then drawing their joined hands to the crotch of her pants, feeling the cloth damp as it brushed the back of his knuckles.

"And what have you been thinking of?" he said.

"You," she replied. She leaned forward and kissed him lightly, her nipples swinging through his chest-hair. Then she stood up again and, releasing his hand, touched a finger to his lips. "Wait."

She was an artist by hobby, not a very good one – although of course he never told her that – and the flat was cluttered with half-finished boards, silvery lead tubes of acrylic that she seemed to have tortured and then abandoned, rags that looked like a butcher's aprons. He no longer noticed the smell of white spirit that permeated the place.

"Wait," she said again, very softly, turned away from him, bending over to rootle amongst the litter next to her easel.



The pale-blue fabric of her briefs was tight across her smooth little buttocks, the shadow of her sex faintly visible. "Gotcha."

She was holding a long paper bag as she moved back towards him.

The name of Conroy's Art Shop was printed in red down the length of the bag.

Watching his face, she slowly, with both hands, pulled the sides of the bag down along its contents, making a striptease of it. First the head, then the shaft appeared of a large, bushy squirrel-hair paintbrush.

His book fell onto the floor. He didn't move to pick it up. He was totally absorbed by the performance Helen was putting on, his gaze locked on her.

He turned slightly, but instantly she raised a hand, commanding him to be still.

The brush naked, she tiptoed the two paces back to the bed. "Let me paint you," she whispered, "with my patent invisible paint, available only from the finest magical emporia, and even then only at enormous cost."

She stroked the silky brush-head over his forehead and then down the ridge of his nose to his lips.

"No, don't move," she admonished. "I hate it when my life-models can't stay still."

With quick, neat dabs she delineated his chin, then with a single slow brushstroke traced the line from under one earlobe all the way around his neck, across his adam's apple, up the crease until she just touched his other lobe.

"I think that's the face done," she said, her forehead furrowed in concentration.

His shoulders were next, then his chest. To paint his nipples she leaned close for the detail work, and he could feel her breath, coming slightly irregularly now, against the sweat-sleek skin around them. He dared not move, although he could feel his penis, bolt-hard, pulsing as if it were trying to reach out for her. The touch of the hair was like a dream of breeze, a dream within a dream.

Helen put the head of the brush into his navel and twirled it.

"I think the critics may remark that the artist seemed to

have hurried the second part of the portrait a little," she said.

She meandered the brush down through his pubic hair and round the base of his erection to where his balls hung in their slack warm sack. He was aching for her to begin painting the shaft itself, but she just grinned at him and carried on concentrating on his balls, lifting first one and then the other over on his thigh with the broad tuft of squirrel-hair, then jostling the balls through the veiny skin, watching them start to move of their own accord.

When she finally started to brush the invisible, intangible paint up the shaft of his penis in long slow strokes he threw his head back on the pillow and stared at the sun-blotched ceiling, feeling his lips form something close to a grimace of pain. Almost at once he had to close his eyes. Although he was distantly aware of the rest of his body, of the muscles of his arms working as his hands clenched and unclenched, now his consciousness was entirely filled by the sensations coming from his erection, which seemed in his mind to have grown until it was half as large as the rest of him.

She took the shaft between a finger and a thumb to hold it still while she painted around the ridge of the head, then splayed the hair over the bell. "And now, I think," she said, "my masterpiece is almost ready to be finished."

He felt the rush of air as she flung the brush into a far corner of the room, and opened his eyes.

Helen was pulling her briefs down over her knees with an appealingly clumsy, girlish haste. She stumbled slightly as she lifted one leg to free it, and reached out to steady herself against the side of the bed.

She'd paused in his dream then, had Helen, looking earnestly at him. "Wherever you are now," she'd said, "make sure to be there."

And then she'd been climbing astride his face, her breasts against his waist, both her hands clutching his erection. Her sex had been a fond-remembered swirl of coral pinks and darker reds among sweat-flattened hair as she'd lowered it spasmodically towards his mouth, while at the same time she'd slowly eased the head of his penis between her lips, sucking teasingly, lightly flicking it with her tongue-tip.

And then he'd awoken in the broad bed of Mrs Melrose's excellently clean establishment.

He was troubled all through breakfast by the dream. He

might have caught a few further scattered moments of sleep during the pre-dawn hours as he tossed and turned in bed, avoiding the broad and spreading damp patch, worrying about how he was going to meet Mrs Melrose's eye during the rest of his stay because she'd be bound to notice the stain eventually even if he made his bed himself, and think he'd been jerking off. He'd been disturbed the most, though, by those final words of the dream-Helen, the firm instruction that he couldn't quite understand. There was a lot of guilt in him, not just because of the dream – the first sexual dream he'd had about her since her death – and not just because several times in the gloom his penis had returned to full erection as he re-experienced in his memory the sensations of the dream. The main guilt was the old familiar one, the one that had been burdening his soul for the past eleven months, ever since . . .

Ever since the morning that was the usual basis of his dreams of Helen.

West Hampstead Tube Station. Quarter to eight on a Tuesday. The platform full of other commuters. As usual, there's some kind of hitch on the southbound Bakerloo Line, and the trains are coming only half as often as they should. When they do arrive, they're packed with multi-faced yet faceless humanity, a concretion of fabric and flesh. It may be a while before

there's enough room in one of them for Helen and himself to cram themselves aboard. On her face there's the somewhat fraught expression she seems to have been wearing for the past week or two whose reason he's not been able to discover; he's asked her if she's pregnant, but it hasn't been that, couldn't have been, anyway, with the precautions they take; she's told him convincingly that there's nothing the matter, she's joyous as field grass in a spring breeze, and he's allowed himself to believe her.

Hungry, he tells her he's going to gamble a coin in the chocolate machine – sometimes it produces an overpriced, heat-distorted bar; sometimes it doesn't. She nods, smiles, stays at the front of the platform as he worms himself to its rear.

There's a thunder along the track. There are no sounds of the train slowing – odd how London Transport always has spare trains to shuffle around empty when there's a shortage of trains on the line. The machine swallows his coin and he tugs at a drawer that obdurately refuses to budge. He's gambled and lost. Behind him the air darkens as the train rushes along the platform, and there's a shriek, abruptly cut off, followed by many shrieks that will not cease.

He knows even as he turns, his limbs clawing their way through treacle, what has happened.

Helen.

She knew.

Hence the sadness in her face.

A confusion of moments becomes a confusion of hours, days, weeks. Sombre faces peering into his. Stern faces, some of them. She was pushed. Did he push her? No, he was on the other side of the crowd from her. She was pushed deliberately. Accidentally. Deliberately. Accidentally. No one will ever know. No one will ever be blamed.

Except that *he* will be blamed, and forever. Blamed because he let go of her to buy a bar of second-rate chocolate that he couldn't even buy. Blamed because he left her on her own when she needed him to be beside her. Blamed because he didn't try hard enough to take the sorrow from her eyes.

Finally, after a lifetime of incomprehension, one morning he makes his way to work, forcing himself to take the tube from West Hampstead Station as if he could exorcise his soul's haunting, feeling as if, all the way from home to High Holborn, he's an explorer treading ground where no one has ever been before. His desk has been dusted. Someone – probably Jennifer – has put a fluted blue vase on it with a sprig of out-of-season flowers. They care for him, all the people there, his friends and colleagues, colleague-friends, and they're sorry for him; but it'll soon be Christmas and he can see the reproach in their eyes that he didn't wait until afterwards before coming in, so they could be sorry for him at a time when everybody's pretty miserable anyway.

Only Derek, the office Scotsman, whom he's never really known that well, whom he guesses is gay and senses might fancy him – only Derek has the time in the season of good cheer to offer him the kind of sympathy that doesn't feel like sympathy.

Days go by. Christmas comes, Christmas goes. He doesn't see the New Year in because by ten o'clock on the last evening of the old year he's drunk the bottle of sherry and half the bottle of whisky he bought for the occasion, thrown up, and collapsed into unconsciousness on the bathroom floor with his hands holding the base of the toilet.

Twelve months ago his hands were around Helen's waist at midnight as she rode on top of him. They'd gone to bed at eleven with a couple of bottles of cheap, warm fizzy wine, and after a while she'd shown him new things you could do with cheap, warm fizzy wine, but they'd somehow managed,

giggling frantically, stopping and starting in their lovemaking, both to hold back their climaxes until the first chimes of church bells striking twelve had come in through the window and whistles and bangs had begun carving the night. He was still trembling long after the echo had faded of the twelfth and final chime . . .

He wakes at five in the morning, this new year, and greets it by throwing up again.

January.

February.

MarchAprilMayJuneJuly.

"You're fuck all use to anybody, you know, the way you are," says Derek, leaning across the desk. "Stop looking at the fucking computer and look at me for a minute. Your work's all shit, and there's a limit to how long the rest of us can keep it from mattering. You come in each morning smelling of puke, and you get smashed at lunchtime, and everybody knows you're sometimes smuggling a half-bottle into the lavs to toke up there. I'm telling you as a friend, before Hoggett tells you while he's firing you, you can't go on like this, and none of the rest of us can either. You've got to let go of her."

"I'm sorry," he mumbles. Eleven o'clock in the morning and he's half-pissed already. "So sorry."

"Take yourself on a holiday," says Derek. "You must have some holiday time due. Don't just use it to drink yourself to death in West Hampstead. Go somewhere."

"Fuck off."

Derek deliberately misunderstands. "OK, if that's how you prefer it, *fuck off* somewhere. Where's somewhere you've never been?"

"Just about everywhere," he mumbles.

"Have you ever been to the Edinburgh Festival?"

"No."

"It's a great place for forgetting things."

"Don't want to forget."

"Yes you do."

And by lunchtime he finds he's booked himself a room and bought himself train tickets.

On the weekend he uses the fact of his having made the purchases as a stick with which to fight off the need to drink himself into the void. Saturday seems to last forever, the day patterned by sudden cold sweats, shakes, restlessness. That night he can't sleep at all, just watches the streetlights through the gap in the curtains, listens to the pulse of West Hampstead's never-ceasing traffic. Sunday is a little better, and it's with several hours' sleep inside him that he turns up for work on Monday, feeling as if he's a devout medieval monk who's virtuously subjected himself to some especially gruelling form of self-purification.

Work goes well that week, swingingly, better than ever.

He doesn't need his holiday to the Edinburgh Festival any more, not now he's returned to the peak of his form. He might as well cancel.

Derek won't let him.

He swears at the man, then invites him out to the pub after work – he's no longer worried about relapsing back into the darkness. He's come to realise that Derek's his best friend in the world.

Yes, Derek is indeed gay. No, no offence meant, you understand, but Derek doesn't in fact fancy him – just so we both know. That's all right. He doesn't know what he'd have done if it had been otherwise – women are so much better at deflecting advances than men ever learn to be.

Helen is adroit at letting men off the . . .

Helen is dead.

That's something he believes he can now accept.

Only Derek has to pull him out of the pub after the third pint and see him onto his tube for home after extracting a promise that there'll be no detours to the off-licence or the pub after he gets off the train in West Hampstead . . .

It was a nice morning, so he decided to walk into town rather than try to fathom out the mysteries of Edinburgh's bus service. Mrs Melrose had given him a copy of the Fringe Guide, and he absently leafed through it as he sauntered along the pavement. After a long uphill stretch flanked by grand residential houses – most of which seemed to be bed & breakfasts much like Mrs Melrose's – he worked his way through a clutter of shops and then began the downhill stroll into the centre of Edinburgh.

At length he found himself sitting on a bench in the Princes Street Gardens, with the Castle frowning down at him and clutches of kids around him doing their best to seem enthusiastic – or, more often, not even bothering to try – about the celebrated floral clock to which their parents had hauled them. There didn't seem to be much in the guide that attracted him: a recital of Belgian bagpipe music, a performance of the Kama Sutra by Native American puppets, concerts of chamber music by composers he'd never heard of whose names were almost entirely made up of consonants, a troupe of poets from Slovenia, a nude enactment of *Peter Pan*, Shakespeare in Gaelic, Dr Lavengro's Animal-Free Circus, the choir of the Communist Party of East Lothian, fifty thousand different stand-up comedians who'd received favourable notices in *Time Out*, an exhibition of Cubist photography . . .

Among the ads at the back was one for a record shop in Rose Street, and a little street map was thoughtfully provided. Helen had been fond of various bands and artistes whose CDs she'd generally had to order specially in London because they weren't readily available outside Scotland: Robin Williamson's solo albums, Savourna Stevenson, various others whose names he couldn't for the moment remember but knew he'd recognise if he saw them. If she'd been with him – and, after his dream, he almost felt that she was, because he could still, he could swear, taste her on his tongue – she'd have been stocking up on music by all of these and others she'd not previously heard of. He ought to buy some goodies to take back to London as a return-home present for her.

Checking and double-checking his orientation to make sure he wasn't about to make a fool of himself in this strange city, he worked out that Rose Street wasn't very far from here, just on the other side of Princes Street, it seemed.

He was quite surprised, fifteen minutes later – about ten of which had been spent waiting for the lights on Princes Street to change – that his mapreading had been perfectly accurate.

He remembered, now, the reputation that Rose Street had once had: the only thing there'd been more than whores in Rose Street were pubs. But the place had been cleaned up – the pubs had genteel outdoor seating, and promised delicious viands within; the women walling the sprightly new cobblestones were temps and tourists, he reckoned, rather than good-time girls.

And there it was ahead of him: Gallagher's Music.

A golden oldie was tumbling out of the open door onto the cobblestones: 'Job's Tears', the Incredible String Band, from either *Wee Tam and the Big Huge* or *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*. One time Helen had been playing this song in the kitchen when he'd turned her around, bent her over the table, pulled up her skirt and down her pants, and made love to her so urgently that neither of them had lasted out the track. Images came back to him, layering themselves over the stones and glass of Rose Street's buildings. After she'd recovered from

"KRISTIE. Like Agatha, BUT WITH A 'K' RATHER THAN A 'C, H', AND IT'S A FIRST NAME, NOT A LAST. AND YOU ARE?"

that giddy bout she'd stood up and turned around, hitched up the front of her skirt and stuffed his fingertips into herself. She'd come again on his knuckles, and then, her face and neck blotched with pale pink, had led him to the bedroom and revived him with caresses until he was inside her again and they were yelling as the chicken burned in the oven.

Luckily the lights were low in Gallagher's Music. He pretended to be browsing through a rack of CDs while he waited for his erection to subside.

The titles of the CDs began to swim into focus.

He smiled ruefully as if at Helen standing alongside him. Jimmy Shand and His Band. Andy Stewart. Kenneth McKellar. All the Tartan music.

He moved over to the other side of the shop. Runrig. Simple Minds. Al – not Andy – Stewart. Yes, and there was a cluster by the String Band – but Helen already had all of their CDs that she wanted. Savourna had a new one out, so he grabbed a copy of that, and on impulse, choosing solely by the pictures on the inserts, he added two or three other clarsach CDs by players whose names were unfamiliar to him. If he was going to pick blind among the harpists, he might as well pick blind all over the shop. It wasn't his own money he was spending, after all, but Helen's: they'd both taken out big life insurance policies, thinking it was really a waste of money because they'd not see anything back from them until they were too far into their dotage to notice. Rock'n'roll and New Age, jazz and neofolk – she'd be sure to like at least some of the dozen or so he piled up.

An elbow jogged the stack, and he had to juggle not to spill CDs all over the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so clumsy."

A slim hand helped stabilise the pile.

"It's OK. My fault entirely," he said reflexively.

A giggle. "You're very polite for an Englishman."

He was slow to register her as a person rather than just one of life's annoying little intrusions. When he looked at her face in the semi-shadows he saw that she was smiling at him as if they were old friends. For a moment he was alarmed – was this one of the fabled Rose Street harlots, driven indoors by the efforts of the City Council? – but the thought hardly had the time to form before he realised it couldn't be true. She wasn't coming on to him, not that at all.

"Are you a tourist here yourself?" he said, the question out in the air between them without his having intended to put it there.

She laughed. "Good guess. I'm not *quite* a stranger to Edinburgh, because I was born here. But I was still a girl when my Dad died and we moved to Durham."

"You've not lost your accent. Not completely."

"If you lived in the same house as my Mum you'd have a Scottish accent too – wouldn't matter where you were."

She had quite prominent cheekbones. Her hair was dark, falling in natural curls to her shoulders. He thought her eyes were dark as well, but it was difficult to tell here in the half-light of Gallagher's Music; he could see the gleam in them, though. Full lips, smiling, their darkness a contrast to her very pale skin.

They stood there a few moments longer, caught in the embarrassed pose of two people who've just been slightly stiffly introducing themselves at a party when someone has interrupted their nascent conversation.

"Look, I'd better buy these," he said.

"Hope you've got a good big credit limit on your card." She nodded at the stack, eyebrows raised.

"Enough."

He went to the counter with the cases to settle up. The man there, his face geologically creased, told him one of his selections was crap and he should put it back, but agreed to sell him the rest.

When he turned for the door, the bulky carrier bag at his side, he was startled to see the woman waiting there for him. As he came out into the sunlight she walked alongside him.

"You're here on your own," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"Me likewise. Lonely?"

He didn't reply at once, couldn't. It wasn't a question his inhibitions wanted him to answer. Then: "Yes," he said.

"Don't get me wrong," she said, "but . . ."

She abruptly stopped walking. He took a step or two further before coming to a halt, turning to look at her. She was wearing a long blue and silver-grey peasant dress, all ruffles and checks. Her feet in her open sandals were fetchingly grubby.

"Och, *damn!*" she said, a crease of annoyance crossing her face. "I'm being an idiot here. You *will* take it the wrong way. Of course you will."

"Try me."

"Well, I was just wondering if you'd like us to do the Festival together. I'm not saying we should . . ."

"I know what you're not saying. You need a friend. I need a friend – ye gods, but how *I* need a friend. I think I like you. I hope you think the same of me. So let's *be* friends for a few days."

"Someone to share things with," she said, nodding emphatically. "That's all."

"Don't say it like that," he responded, reaching with his free hand for her arm. "Who knows? We might just be starting a lifelong friendship. Let's not count that out."

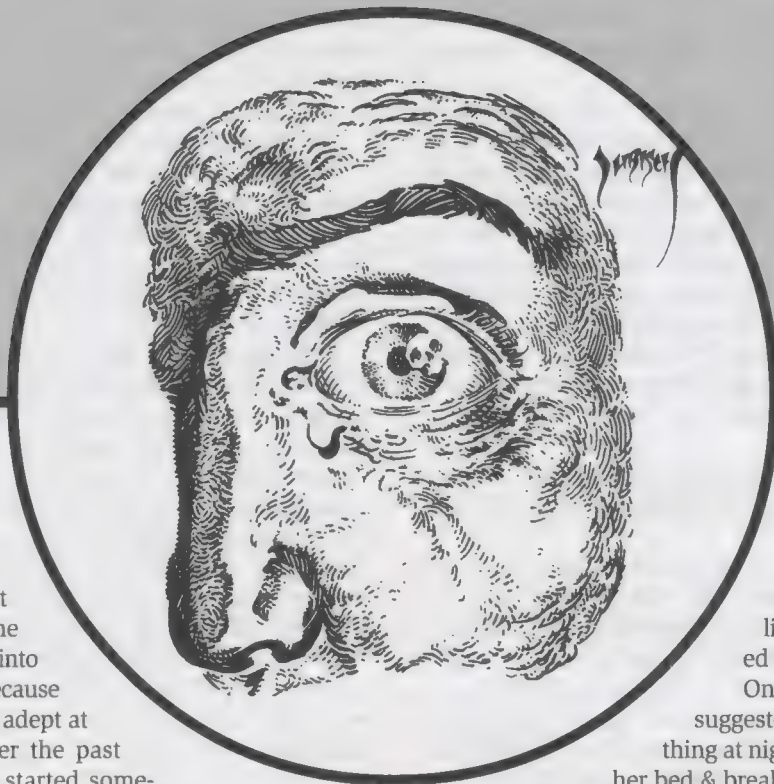
"Aye, but let's not rely on it either."

"Live for the week, the rest can take care of itself."

"That's right," she said. "No claims."

"Come on, then, um . . ."

"Kristie. Like Agatha, but with a 'K' rather than a 'C, h',



and it's a first name, not a last. And you are?"

He told her his name.

As they walked back to busy Princes Street he felt himself smiling – not just the muscles of his face moving into the appropriate position, because practice had rendered him adept at making them do that over the past months, but a smile that started somewhere deep inside him. The icy core of him warmed for the first time in a long while.

He had Mrs Melrose's Fringe Guide, and Kristie had the Official Festival Handbook. On the corner of Princes Street, ignoring the annoyed glances of the pedestrians shifting around them, they consulted the two schedules.

"OK," she said at last. "I'll hold the program open at the page, but upside-down, and you jab with a finger."

They ended up at the Assembly Halls listening to one of those string quartets by an all-consonant composer, and to his astonishment he adored every minute of it.

Later in the afternoon they were passing a record store – not Gallagher's, not Rose Street – and decided they *needed* each to buy a CD of the quartet they'd heard. It was only once they were inside the shop that they discovered neither of them could remember the composer's name.

By the time they'd looked it up in the handbook the impulse had passed.

Later he'd view most of his week at the Festival with Kristie as a time of forgetfulness, because the details of all the things they did together tended to slide one into another, but he would never for the rest of his life become unaware of the *sensation* of those days with her. It was as if they were bonded by something far more than merely a recent friendship, as if somehow in some different lifetime they'd been close for years, and yet the prospect that they might – probably would – say their farewells at the end of the week, promising letters that'd likely never get written and scribbling telephone numbers that'd get lost, didn't dismay him in any way. It was as if she'd brought into his life an appreciation of living that had such an intensity it couldn't – *mustn't* – last for long. So he'd know that he went with her round the Castle one day and Holyrood Palace the next, and that they looked at everything there like the good little tourists they were, and he'd know they saw plays and folk operas and even the Belgian bagpipers, although they drew the line at the nude *Peter Pan* ("I'll bet you Wendy's fat," hissed Kristie), and he'd know they laughed at some of the art in the Modern Art Gallery but together declared undying love for a couple of the pieces; he'd *know*

all of this, but his visual memory of these sights and countless others showed him only dancing eyes, a slight overbite of wicked little teeth, fingers being pulled through dark curls . . .

Once or twice, he knew, he'd suggested to her as they parted last thing at night on the pavement outside her bed & breakfast – just a couple of hundred yards up the road from Mrs Melrose's – that

perhaps they didn't need to say goodnight at all, but she'd smiled and kissed him briefly, fiercely, on the cheek and then pushed him away with the kind of dismissal that didn't make him feel either rejected or gauche.

And he *slept* at nights.

The only thing wrong with Mrs Melrose's was breakfast, and yet he found himself cheerful and refreshed even as he battled with gristly bacon and tepid porridge. By nine o'clock precisely he'd be waiting on the pavement for Kristie to emerge, and together they'd dawdle into the city, laughing and teasing, making transitory plans for what they probably wouldn't end up going to see today.

Yet he didn't forget *everything*. What he remembered were the things that had nothing really to do with the Festival itself, but everything to do with Kristie.

Once, in the middle of the afternoon, they'd been passing Jenners – a department store whose windows were filled with dummies clad in a mixture of aphrodisiac and purposively anti-aphrodisiac clothing – when Kristie had tugged at his arm.

"I remember my Mum used to take us for afternoon tea here," she said. "If we were good, was what she told us. It was the last place in the world my brother and I wanted to go, but just because Mum thought it was a treat meant it really *was* a treat for us too, so we'd do our best to be good, like she said."

"You reckon we've been good as gold?" he joked.

"Aye." She tilted her head as she looked at him. There was a curious, almost calculating look in her eyes before, almost immediately, the laughter returned to them. "Let me buy you an afternoon tea to reward you for being good, gentle sir."

Today's peasant-style dress was oranges, yellows, reds and golds; the colours, so alive in the sunlight, became suddenly restrained and solemn as she led him in through the heavy doorway. It was as if the place had the same effect on her, too, because she was strangely muted as they rode up in the elevator.

But once they were in the café she recovered her vivacity again. They took a table by the window, and almost filled it with a pot of tea and a plateful of small, cubical, plasticine-looking cakes in the kind of bright hues that insects use to warn birds that they're poisonous. The tea was surprisingly

good – they both drank it without milk or sugar, to the apparent horror of their waitress – and the cakes proved perfectly palatable.

“What I used to like to do,” said Kristie after a while, oblivious to the bright yellow cake-crumbs stuck in the corner of her mouth, “while Mum was reading her newspaper and Ian and I were busy not making pests of ourselves, was look at all the old ladies who’d be having their tea here” – she swept her hand around to indicate that the clientele hadn’t much changed – “and imagine what kind of knickers they were wearing.”

He chuckled. “And what did you guess?”

She pulled a long face. “Tweeds,” she said in a gloomy voice. “Tweed underpants, the boringest colours possible, and stitched so as to be difficult to get on and almost impossible to get off.”

This wasn’t the kind of eatery where he’d feel easy laughing aloud, so he bottled the sound up, feeling the pressure building behind his nose.

“They were only allowed to take their knickers off every fourth Saturday night, because that was the only time they ever went to the lavatory,” Kristie pronounced, picking up a cake daintily and then jamming it whole into her mouth.

This time his laughter burst out of him in the form of a half-sneezing, half-coughing fit. Heads turned incuriously to watch him as he pounded his chest. Kristie decorously lifted her plate and spat the remains of her cake onto it, then came round the table to beat between his shoulderblades.

“What about sex?” he said, once he’d recovered himself.

“Ah,” said Kristie, seating herself once more, looking at him archly over her teacup. “Ah, sex. The great mystery to the ladies from Corstorphin. Why did everyone else make such a fuss about it? The ladies *knew*, after all, that all sex was what the coal was brought in.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said grinning, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs out straight. “And maybe all the ladies are looking right back at you at this very moment and wondering what kind of knickers it is that *you’re* wearing.”

“Och, that’s an easy one.” The tip of her tongue at last found the crumb and dislodged it. “I’m not wearing any. I never do.”

The mental picture of her exposed to the air under the loose rumples of her dress instantly sobered him, instantly aroused him. If it weren’t for that interposed millimetre of cloth he could reach out under the table and touch her taboo nakedness. He imagined he could smell the subtle scent of her sweet clean sex. Now his consciousness of her nudity expanded: her belly, her small breasts. The moment for him was as erotically charged as any he could recall, and yet she was *not* naked, and she was *not* looking at him with passion in her eyes, and she was *not*, in the only way that mattered, within touching distance of him. Instead she was leaning across the yellow-topped table towards him, her face animated, her eyes innocently playful, her manner entirely chaste.

He tried to speak lightly. “And how do I know you’re telling the truth?” he said.

She held his gaze with hers, and her smile faded.

“You’ll just have to take my word for it,” she said carefully. “Now, is there any more tea still left in that pot?”

The last day – the last day of this year’s Festival, the last day of his vacation, his last day with Kristie.

“You may call me a very clever girl,” she said as she joined him on the pavement outside her bed & breakfast.

“I would never call you anything else,” he said gallantly, bowing in what he imagined was Edwardian style, “but why in particular this morning?”

“Because I’ve decided what we’ll do tonight, that’s why.”

He bit back an obvious response. They had only a few hours left together. Tomorrow he was catching an early-morning train back to London. They didn’t have enough time for him to risk spoiling it with a wrong remark. “And that is?”

“We’re going to watch the last night of the Edinburgh Tattoo.”

He stared at her. “But you can’t get tickets for love nor money. Or have you somehow . . . ?”

“No.” She threw back her ringlets and treated him to a big grin. “We’re going to have the best view in the entire city of Edinburgh, and we don’t need tickets for it at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pray exhibit patience, my dear friend,” she said in an affected voice poached from one of the Beeb’s Jane Austen serials. “All shall be revealed to you at the proper moment. Now, will you take my arm as we promenade into town . . . ?”

From time to time during the morning (bad poetry remedied immediately afterwards by good mime) he quizzed her again, but it was obvious she wasn’t going to tell him anything more. There was a feeling in the city that the Festival was already well on its way to winding down: the pavements were less raucously crowded; the pedestrians no longer wore the masks of cultural intentness as they walked along; many of the fly-posted advertisements on walls and the windows of dead shops were torn and faded. It wasn’t yet the morning after the circus had melted away into the night, but this was the sense that hung in the streets.

They shared a ploughman’s lunch in a pub just round the corner from the old Traverse Theatre and then, rather than go prospecting for performances to watch, they just strolled aimlessly through the central parts of Edinburgh. A couple of second-hand bookshops on Leith Walk drew their absorption for a while, but not their money. Otherwise they just talked.

And for the first time he told her about Helen.

It was the one thing he’d deliberately kept back from Kristie all week. She’d set the parameters of their relationship, and he’d sworn to abide by them. It would have seemed somehow to have been in disobedience to the spirit of that law if he’d blurted out to her how he’d become a widower not a year back, as if he’d have been trying to worm sexual favours from her using one of the oldest and certainly one of the shabbiest ruses of all. But now, with the deadline of tomorrow’s train fast approaching, he realized that, if he didn’t open himself up today to this closest friend whom he’d so suddenly, so unexpectedly, discovered, this almost magical person, he never would have the chance again, so that their friendship would be left forever incomplete. So he let it spill out about the overwhelming love he’d had for Helen, and the guilt that had consumed him when she’d been gone, and the obscene, obsessive, suicidal drinking, and helpful Derek who’d been a brother to him, and the loneliness that had become all that his life contained until one morning, just a few days ago, when someone in Gallagher’s Music had nearly knocked his stack of CDs out of his hands.

It took him a long time to tell Kristie all this, and by the time he finished they were sitting back in the Princess Street Gardens on what he was pretty certain was the exact same bench by the floral clock where the advertisement for Gallagher’s Music had first caught his eye. It wasn’t quite evening yet, but the afternoon was turning its attentions that way: the sky behind the Castle seemed to be taking on some of the colours of its bleak stones.

When he’d done, they sat in silence. She’d taken his hand in his at some stage and rested it on her lap, but her fingers applied no pressure to his: there was just the contact between their skins, just the warmth.

As he stared at their joined hands, he discovered that all

of the things he'd been talking about were no longer a part of him: they belonged to someone else, the person he'd been until just a few minutes ago. Through the past few days of Festival-going with Kristie he'd been progressively shedding his miseries and his guilts, his longings, even the brightest edges of his memories. The title of one of Helen's Incredible String Band albums came back to him suddenly: *The 5000 Spirits, or The Layers of the Onion*. It had always seemed meaningless to him, but now he felt as if he'd sloughed five thousand ghosts from himself, one by one.

"Which means, I guess," he murmured, "that all I really am is the core of an onion. Rather undignified, but . . ."

"What did you say?"

He glanced up at her. She wasn't looking at him. Instead, she was gazing out fixedly over the emptying gardens. To his astonishment, he saw there were tears in her eyes.

He misunderstood them. "Don't feel sorry for –"

"I wasn't." Sharply.

"Oh."

He hadn't got words. Whatever was going on within her, all he could do was let it run its course. And then, maybe, she would tell him.

He almost missed her whisper.

"You're not the only one who's been lonely."

He leaned towards her. A pigeon landed near them and strutted in search of crumbs. "I'm here. I'm listening," he said.

She released her hand from his and wiped the back of it crossly over her eyes. "I . . . I can't," she said at last.

"Why not?"

"For the same reason you couldn't tell me about your own causes until this afternoon. Before today would have been too early. After today would have been too late. You had to open yourself to me, but to do so at the wrong time would have been to make a mockery of all the rest of" – gesturing at the air with spread fingers as if to try to seize the right word from it – "of this. Of us. Of what this week has been."

"I . . ."

"Don't speak. Don't talk. Don't litter words all around us. Just be still. Just be here beside me."

Minutes drifted away. In one sense he felt as if she'd erected a stone wall between them as thick as any in the Castle; in another it was as if there was no boundary between them at all, as if every breath that she took filled his lungs, where his bloodstream picked up the oxygen to carry it around her body.

"When you're at home," she said at last. "When you're back in your wee flat in West Hampstead going through all the bills and junk mailings that have amassed while you've been away, that's when you'll know what my own loneliness is all about. Until then – well, it'd always be the wrong time, no matter what time I chose."

And then she was leaping to her feet. She stood in front of him, smiled down at him, pressed his face briefly to her midriff.

"Let's go find somewhere you can buy a thirsty woman a drink and maybe a salad or something to eat, and after that we should be getting ready to take our places to watch the Tattoo."

In Deacon Brodie's Tavern he had a pint of heavy, chosen at random, while Kristie had her usual, which was a pint of Guinness. They lingered for a long time over their drinks, talking in the desultory way one does when one knows one should really be packing in as much meaningful conversation as possible because there's a strict limit to the amount of time available. There wasn't any food on offer that appealed to them right then; maybe it was just that neither of them was hungry for anything. When their glasses were empty Kristie made her way to the ladies'; on her way back she paused by

the bar and picked them up another couple of pints.

He looked at his watch. "Won't they be getting ready to begin?"

"Hush," she said. "We don't need to see the start of it."

"But our seats . . . ?"

"There'll be plenty of space for all. Don't worry. Drink up. I know what I'm doing."

And he believed her. All week, except when she'd bumped into him in Gallagher's Music – and he suspected even then – she'd seemed to know exactly what she was doing, and he'd followed her guidance without question. The dozen or so years she must have lived in Durham seemed to have dimmed her memories of Edinburgh not at all, for she'd not only known all the shortcuts and sneaky ways from one place to another, she'd been familiar with the activities of the city, with its soul. Helen had often teased him about the fact that he was always the certain one, where she might haver before making a decision; his sureness had disappeared with Helen's death, of course. This past week it had been Kristie who'd been the certain one in everything the two of them did together, and he'd been contented enough to follow her lead; and yet, paradoxically, it had been as if through the very subordination of decision to her he'd begun to recover his own decisiveness. Now, here, tonight, he *chose* to let her determine what they should do.

At last the second drinks were finished. They both disappeared to their respective lavatories for a precautionary pee, and then met back in the bar before leaving hand in hand into the street. It was cooler now, and he began to wish he'd brought a light jacket this morning; at the time his sleeveless white cotton shirt had seemed more than adequate.

Kristie led him down the Royal Mile as the shadows lengthened and the shops closed. They could hear the sporadic applause behind them of the crowd at the Castle, once a crackle of shots, for a while the oompah, oompah of an English military brass band. She seemed to be hurrying him along a little now, as if, despite her complacency back in the pub, she was just a trifle worried they might be late for wherever they were going.

"Where are you taking me?" he said at last.

"I promised you the best view in Edinburgh of the last night of the Tattoo," she said, pulling at his wrist. "You'll see."

They were nearing Holyrood Palace when she abruptly cut off to the right along a narrow cobblestoned sidestreet he didn't notice was there until they were walking down it.

And then, as the walls to either side seemed to melt away like a sea mist in sunlight and they came out onto grassland, he knew where she was taking him.

"I'm not sure this is entirely legal," she said laughingly as she clambered up and over a fence, skilfully controlling the skirt of her dress so it wouldn't become tangled in her feet.

"Arthur's Seat," he said. "That's where you think we'll get the best view of the Tattoo from. The top of Arthur's Seat."

"Near enough," replied Kristie, gesturing that he should hurry himself over the fence after her. "It's the top of Salisbury Crag. Now come on, come on."

They weren't the only ones making this pilgrimage. Although the evening had descended rapidly, he could see other shapes moving through the greyness. Many of them were couples like Kristie and himself – mostly relatively young, but some older. He guessed that watching the distant spectacle from the top of the Crag must be a traditional practice for Edinburgh's lovers: an annual tryst under the night sky. It filled him with a pleasure he'd almost forgotten how to experience that some of those shapes he saw were moving with the uncertainty and awkwardness of age.

"KRISTIE, you say?" The accent said CHICAGO LOUD and cLEAR. "I've BEEN LOOKING ALL OVER FOR HER..."

There was a path leading to the left of the Crag, and Kristie moved briskly along it, her arm linked through his. The moon was only about a quarter full, and thin clouds paused frequently to drape themselves across it; the Plough was a dramatic jag across the opposite half of the sky. He could hear his own breath, and Kristie's, and the distant wail of a pipe band, but nothing else – no traffic noise, no longer the steps of the other pilgrims he'd detected in the gloom.

The path doubled almost back on itself to the right, and now they were seriously climbing.

"Isn't this a great adventure?" said Kristie. He could hear the smile in her voice.

"This whole week's been a great adventure for me," he said, annoyed at himself that he was puffing a little. "Thanks to you."

"And it's been the same for me," she said seriously. "Thanks to you."

She steered him off the path onto rough grass and weeds, all shorn short by the sheep that roamed this hillside during the day – there were little piles of sheep-droppings, too, which he felt beneath his feet once in a while as they continued to climb.

And then suddenly they were on top of a ridge, and the whole of Edinburgh was laid out before them. Gazing at its lights, the breath coming noisily in his throat, he was reminded of how he'd seen the city as the train had slowed towards Waverley Station. The lights then had seemed to be accepting him reluctantly, greeting him with the kind of courtesy one should always offer a wayfarer but at the same time keeping themselves reserved, not giving him any real welcome. Now he felt as if he could have reached out across the darkness to cradle nests of those lights in his palms, that they would gladly accept his touch. The city had made him a part of itself, and now it was a part of him, too.

And this was all thanks to Kristie.

He lowered his gaze from the cityscape. She'd knelt down in front of him, facing away from him, herself gazing out at the lights of the city, her eyes fixed upon the pool of silver glow amid a heavy black fist: the great auditorium at the heart of Edinburgh Castle.

"Don't stand towering over me," she murmured, reaching around behind her to pat the ground.

He knelt. A chilly breeze combed the top of the Crag, and without thinking he clasped his arms around her, linking his fingers, to give her his warmth. He tried not to be conscious of her breasts, uncovered inside her flimsy dress, pressing softly against his sleeveless forearms.

She relaxed against him, and turned her head. He could see her eyes were closed. "Kiss me," she whispered.

Craning his neck, he kissed her full on the lips. Reflexively his tongue probed to open mouth, but she pulled her face

away before he'd had time to do more than touch her teeth.

Again looking out over the city, she knelt upright and very gently unpicked his fingers. Before he knew quite what she was doing she'd put his hands one on each of her breasts. He could feel firm little nipples couching themselves into his palms. The cloth of the dress seemed as sheer and insubstantial as finest gossamer; her breasts could have been naked in his hands.

For an instant he almost recoiled. Surely this was wrong. Kristie was his deepest friend, not his lover. He shouldn't be handling her like this. His penis shouldn't be hardening. He shouldn't be desecrating the memory of sweet Helen with someone else. He shouldn't be . . .

Shouldn't be . . .

Shouldn't be . . .

Should be.

This was the perfect rightness, to be here touching at long last her nakedness. This was the natural conclusion to the week in which he'd shed – Kristie had teased away – the five thousand tragic spirits that had been holding him in their deathly thrall. The week in which the guilt he'd been clutching to himself as if it were a poisoned treasure had slowly leached away through the pores of his skin. Helen had been telling him in his dream of her that this should be so, that it was time now for him to be where he *was*. He'd been loitering in the shadows of half-death for too long, far too long; now these two women, Helen and Kristie, one dead but not gone, the other all too evidently alive and very much here, in front of him, her behind pressed into his groin – her behind that was strange to him in that it was a little larger and a little softer than Helen's had been, and yet seemed every bit as familiar, and cherished – had combined their efforts to bring him, against his will, back into aliveness.

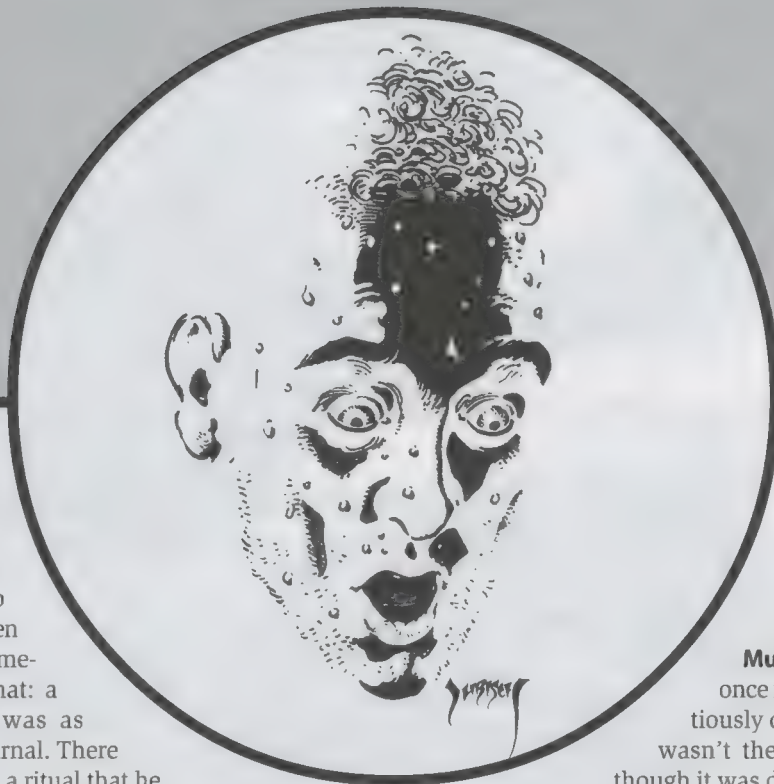
Moving slowly, so as not to unseat her breasts from his hands, Kristie leaned forward, taking her weight on one palm spread on the coarse grass. The action had the effect of pulling her rear away from him, and he almost tried to follow her, to retain the warmth of her buttocks against himself; but then something told him to stay where he was.

He could just see her other hand reach round and clumsily tug her loose skirt up. He settled back on his ankles, watching. Watery moonlight showed him two pale rounds. His mouth twitched in a smile: it seemed she'd been telling him the truth back in the café at the top of Jenners.

She spread her legs a little further. Inviting him. Inviting him into her secret, her unseen sex. But "Wait," she said. "Hold me again."

Once more he put both arms around her.

Kristie eased a little forward and put one hand between her legs, guiding him past the curve of her rump and then slowly in towards the folds of her sex. Some other time he might have plunged himself fully into her then, driven by the urgency of



Mike DUBISCH art

his passion to encase himself entirely within her, but there had settled about him a sense that she was introducing him into not just an act of sex, not even an act of love, but into something much more than that: a profound mystery that was as much spiritual as it was carnal. There was a ritual involved here, a ritual that he could not understand but which was clearly of enormous significance to her; as so often during this week, he must be content to let her lead, while he followed.

The noise from the far-off Castle was increasing now, the powerful, inexorable tidal sound that large gatherings of people make when a spectacle is approaching its culmination. Kristie was pushing herself slowly backwards, engulfing him. There was a roaring in his ears that surely couldn't be the distant crowds. He'd long since lost his hold on her breasts; now his hands were at her hips, fingers trembling and jerking against the ridges of her pelvic bones. There was no urge left in him to thrust himself into her; everything was completely under her control.

A crescendo of sound washed across the diamond lights of the city, a thunder of cannon, and a sudden curtailment.

And she had taken him fully inside herself, her buttocks squashed against his thighs. He was experiencing flashes of perception, as if a strobe light were playing across his senses: the fire of her about his penis, that smoothness again of her buttocks against the rough skin of his loins, the scent of greenness in the cold evening air, the far yet nigh lights of the city that had made itself a part of him.

Still she did not rock herself backward and forward along his shaft, just held it firmly in place, letting the only movement between them be chasing, fleeting pulses of herself up and down his length. He felt his own response beginning to build, as if some weighty monster were being hauled up from the core of him.

Edinburgh was entirely still and noiseless, it seemed, except for the solitary, infinitely lonely sound of a piper playing a last lament into the silence.

And as its loneliness died, so did his.

His orgasm was a storm wind, sweeping all before it. He closed his eyes before the hurricane could strike blindness into them. He felt the wind blust-ering up the seemingly immense length of his hardness, as if it would never stop, as if nothing could ever stop it. And then the force burst from the end of him, searing him, again and again, fragmenting his experience of time so that it came to seem as if he'd always been gouting out his seed, spending himself forever.

But it did stop, eventually.

He found himself on all fours on the cold grass. Alone.

Much, much later, fully clothed

once more, he picked his way cautiously down the side of the hill. He wasn't the only one doing so. Even though it was darker now than it had been earlier, he could see these fellow-pilgrims more

clearly than before – see them as if they were lit.

Couples had climbed the Crag earlier in the evening. Those descending it, each of them moving with the same wariness as he was himself, were on their own.

In the strange light-that-was-not-a-light he saw the eyes of the nearest of these unaccompanied men. There was puzzlement in them, yes, but also the vitality of life freshly reborn, as if an obscuring hauntedness had been washed away.

He approached the person closest to him, a tall middle-aged man who carried himself with intense dignity. His eyes were merry glitters within the darkness of his skin. Those eyes watched him, seemed to be waiting for him to speak.

"I was here with someone," he began. "Have you seen her? She's been my friend this past week and . . . She was with me, but now she seems to have vanished and I don't where she can have gone to. Have you . . . ?"

The man frowned. "I was with someone as well when I climbed up here, but she's gone now. Have you seen her? Short red hair, tall, very pale. Kristie . . ."

A guy clambering down above them had clearly overheard the exchange, because now he interrupted. "Kristie, you say?" The accent said Chicago loud and clear. "I've been looking all over for her . . ."

At the base of the hill beckoned the ocean of night, and beside it the men who had been lonely gathered, becoming ripples at its edge. An eddy was split by a small stone, and the sound of the splash became words: "Has anyone here seen Kristie?" A wave broke into a rock pool, scattering its waters far across darkened sand, and the droplets that rained down were words, too: "Has anyone here seen Kristie?" Two breakers intersected in a complex pattern of diamonds: "Has anyone here seen Kristie?" The water sucked back, tearing at the shingle: "Has anyone here . . . ?"

And a piece of bleached driftwood lay on the shore well clear of the waters, waiting for someone to come strolling along the beach and pick it up.

John Grant's last story for TTA was the extremely well received 'Wooden Horse' in TTA32. To find out more visit John's message board on our forum: www.ttapress.com/discus.



I took us an hour to get to the front of the queue. I rested my cane against the display case and looked through the warm, minutely hand-smear glass at the things we had come to steal. No amount of velvet plush or subtly softening back-lighting could make them any less horrible. They were nails, but not the kind you would buy in a hardware store. They were more like baby daggers: crude, half-finished, brutally effective. They were six inches long, the points crusted with stuff that looked like rust. The heads were flattened plugs, designed to pin pierced flesh in place.

What made them all the more awful was their appearance of modernity. Plucked from the swamps of history by the magic of the Stalin time nets, they seemed right at home in that twenty-first century's macabre bath in bathhouse glass and ceiling-mounted masers. The nails belonged in that place, belonged as much as the slowly-moving worshippers with their raincoats, camcorders and Dr Scholl sandals.

It was dark and humid in the Church of the New Light. The crowds had carried the rain in from outside. Bodies pressed together as they shuffled forward, but there was a circle of small emptiness around me; people who saw me served away from contact. That was hardly unfamiliar, but this was my first time in Bible Belt and it *did* seem strange that people looked at my steel Ship eyes *before* they looked at my face.

A woman looked straight at me and breathed the word "Pervert" just loud enough to hear. I looked directly at her and her face transformed into a thing of rust, barbed wire and grinding metal. Normally, the sights with which my eyes afflict me are here-and-gone phenomena. A flicker of perception like the slashing of a razor, and then the skin of the universe knits back up around it. This one lingered, though. She would still appear the same way to me some twenty minutes later when they dragged her broken body

NAILS

STORY: JEREMY MINTON • ART: VINCENT CHONG

from the church.

I turned to say something to McKenzie. She was oblivious to anything but the nails. Her skin was lit by the Magdalene Lamps and it looked as if she was blushing. She has always been lovely to me, and never more so than in that moment, with the shadows, the singing, the rustle and press of the crowd. She stroked the back of my hand and whispered the words, "For God." For about the thousandth time that morning I ran my tongue over the lumps of brittle plastic where my back teeth had previously been. I wished I could get the taste of blood out of my mouth.

She said the words again, and this time there was no missing the question mark. She had always been the strong one. It was she who had thought of the plan, she who knew what it was all for. But right then it was down to me to make sure we went through with it. I nodded, but I could tell it wasn't enough. So I said her own words back to her:

"For God."

Of all the lies I'd told before, and all that would come afterwards, that was maybe the worst. McKenzie might be doing this for God, for faith, for hope, for high and noble things. I was doing it for her. Only ever for her.

Questions of motive inevitably arise: it's a basic human need. Something awful happens, we look for a reason, something to make it matter. Some people speak of a plan, of divine motivation which turns evil into good. McKenzie always hated that kind of crap.

"It makes God seem like some soap-opera hack, spending eternity dreaming up twists, getting everything to work out in the end."

She talked like this a lot in the early days, back when the plan was just one of those what-if games where you take an idea and see how far it will go.

"Do you seriously think God would have gone to the bother of inventing gravity and mechanics and causality if he was just going to step in and turn the world around whenever He felt like it? That's so stupid it's painful to even try and understand it. God doesn't plot and He doesn't intervene. All He does is ask. He talks to us and asks us to do what is right. What happens after that is down to us.

Or else it's down to luck. But there are no plans, no plotters."

She was hotter on philosophy than me, but I'm not so sure she was right. The more I think about things, the more it seems to me that there are plots and plotters at work. We are all caught up in them and we never know what or why.

The day we were arrested, that one word 'why' must have appeared about a billion times in a thousand different languages. But I don't think any of the people posing it were interested in the answer. Not even Lainier, the officer who was in charge of our interrogation. I remember him pacing my cell, leaning over the table so that his face was a quarter inch from mine. I could see a cluster of blackheads on his chin.

"Thirty-eight people died that day." He had been living on coffee and cigarettes for months and all of it was there in his breath. "More than a hundred injured. And I want to know what the hell you thought it was for."

I don't think he ever found out though, at any rate not from me. I didn't try to hold back. How could I? Once those investigators get going you don't have a choice about whether you talk or not. But Lainier never got his answers because he never wanted them. Not deep down. In my experience, the people who are most keen to ask in what you have to say.

The truth that Lainier didn't want to hear is that we stole the nails because we needed them. Except that's wrong. It makes it sound like *this* is all about us. We stole the nails because *the* world needed them. We had written to Mark Uraboni explaining what we wanted and he had refused to help. We were trying to save the planet and he could have been part of it, but he preferred to keep the nails in his church and change people ten bucks a time to come and look at them. Under the circumstances, we had a perfect moral right

to take what we needed.

"And what about the people in the church?" demanded Lainier. I could see disgust on his face, bright orange spots of it. They were the shape of stylized teardrops. This happens all the time: my Ship eyes pick up feelings from people round about me, leak the feelings down my optic nerve. I blinked. The little spots were gone. Lainier saw the flicker and thought he had me rattled. He leaned in close. "What about their lives, Karl? Or do you think you had a right to take those too?"

I wondered if *he* thought he had a right to put lighted matches in my mouth or run high voltage current through my feet. Did he have a right to do those things, or did he just do them because they were part of his job?

"That's not a fair question," I whispered. "We didn't mean to kill them. We didn't mean to kill anyone."

"Bullshit."

"No," I said, "it's true. When we triggered the barbs we thought that they were going to be a distraction, something to disable the guards."

He didn't believe me. A part of me hated him for that. Hated him for not believing, and for what he did to me because he would not believe. But there was part of me that understood as well. If I had been in his place, I wouldn't have believed me either.

We got the barbs in Venice. Shells had been bombarding the city for weeks – we could hear pieces of masonry dropping into the canals as we clambered through the rubble – but not one bomb went off during the course of our meeting. At the time, we assumed Quatrain had set that up. As theories went it was only marginally more stupid than any of the alternatives.

He was sitting near the window at the only intact table in what had once been a good restaurant. There was a small black briefcase handcuffed to one wrist. He'd brought this gnome from one of the Swiss banks with him. Her expression of cultivated boredom was so perfect you'd think it had been put there by machine, but it cracked, just once, when Quatrain got up for the handshake and she got her first good look at me.

"Collateral damage," I said.

"I'm sorry?" She sounded shocked at being spoken to. She was there as a witness, a guarantor of the deal. If our terms were agreed, her bank would become the conduit through which our money would flow to Quatrain, but for legal purposes she wasn't even here. "Were you talking to me?"

"You were wondering how my face got so fucked up."

"I don't think I was." She spoke to me as if she kept her vowels in the freezer. It was hard for me to look at her. Her face was drowned in cold blue light. I get this with bank people, sometimes. Their loyalty routines do something bad to my eyes.

"Actually, you were. I recognised your expression. Don't worry: I've been seeing it half my life."

Sometimes I tried to tell myself that if I said 'it doesn't matter' to sufficient different people then one day I'd come to believe it. I was just a kid when the flamer went through my house, killing my parents and plunging me into agony and darkness. Now I carry Ship eyes in the ruins of my sockets and I can see the way I look in other people's faces. Sometimes it's concealed by politeness, sometimes it's bold as you please, but always it is there. If you want to know why I stuck with McKenzie, stuck with her through everything then maybe I can explain it like this: she is the only person in the whole of forever who has never once looked at me that way.

"Let's get down to business," said Quatrain. He had a voice from nowhere; not American, not English, not anything. He

removed four jars from his briefcase and placed them on the table.

McKenzie raised an eyebrow and nodded towards the corner of the room. "What about them?"

It was only then that I realised we weren't alone. There was a pile of rubble where the ceiling had come down and underneath it a pair of Love People. They looked as if they had gone some place beyond death. They were emaciated, glassy-eyed, clearly in the terminal stages of Ship tech addiction. They did not speak, they hardly seemed to breathe. You'd never have thought they were alive at all if it were not for the fact that every now and again the hand of one would grasp and stroke the fingers of the other.

Quatrain spared them half a glance and shrugged. "What about them? They're not doing any harm."

"He's right," I said. "They're too far gone to understand what's happening."

Quatrain pushed one of his jars a little way towards us. It looked disconcertingly like one of those pots of individual jam you used to get in hotels. I picked it up and flipped the lid. The barbs were little black specks, smaller than strawberry seeds, suspended in viscous gel. My eyes recognised their technological kinship, and specification data began to scroll across my view. I read for a while, then nodded. "This looks like what we agreed."

McKenzie turned to Quatrain. "And you're sure this is going to work?"

Quatrain looked taken aback. Maybe it was the directness of her question, or maybe he had never got his head around the idea of a woman calling the shots.

He said, "If the information you gave me was correct then this will meet your requirements."

"The information was good," McKenzie said, with the confidence of one who knew exactly how much it had cost. McKenzie had inherited a fortune from her father, a gene-tech billionaire back in the day when science meant exploiting the universe rather than exploiting the Ship, and her faith in money was nearly as strong as her faith in God.

"Then this will work," said Quatrain.

He sounded pretty confident, but he could afford to be: it wasn't his arse on the line.

"I looked at those specs before we passed them on," I said. "I've seen national banks that aren't as well defended as that church."

Most churches support some kind of security these days. It seems inevitable now that they have become targets in the war for the world's soul. Clinics and churches, universities and mosques, synagogues and schools, all now garb themselves in wire and steel, stick guards or automated weapons at their doors, and few have anything half so precious to defend as the Church of the New Light. The first three experts we had shown our specifications to had smiled regretfully and told us what we were trying to do could simply not be done. Quatrain was unconcerned.

"It's ape tech," he told us. "Monkey stuff. It doesn't stand a chance against these barbs. They're so new they're hardly even illegal yet. Mumbai has only just got round to proscribing them. Six months ago no one on Earth who would even have known what they were."

I'm less hung up than most about putting Staaln technology in my body, but I did not find that statement wholly comforting.

"Is it safe?" said McKenzie.

Quatrain turned his gaze towards the Love People. "Everything's relative, isn't it? The stuff those two are using was probably harmless when they started, just terribly hard to give up. The tags say the barbs are non-pathogenic, and our

own tests bear that out. Long term, who knows? But I don't suppose you'll want to do this too often."

"It's a one off," said McKenzie.

Quatrain nodded politely but I could see him thinking: *yeah, right. Like I've never heard that before.*

I said, "Just because something came up from under Mumbai it doesn't automatically mean it's superior to home-grown stuff. The Staaln didn't have a monopoly on technical ingenuity, even when they were alive. Besides, if this has been officially classified, the specs are public domain. Church security could have built a fix."

"They could, but they won't. It's not a question of know-how, it's a question of mindset. Look at that stuff you're holding: a million years old and it still works perfectly. We couldn't build with that kind of life-span and even if we could we wouldn't see the point. Their minds worked differently from ours."

Much good it did them. The Staaln had died centuries before their ship had crashed on prehistoric Earth. All that remained of their glorious culture was an ancient grave which we had turned into a toy shop. All the same, I knew Quatrain was right. Ship tech was better than its human equivalent. That's why everyone wanted it.

"If that doesn't reassure you, you could try remembering that Miss Jones's bank will not release your money until their assessors confirm that your objective has been met. It's not in my interest to sell you stuff that isn't going to work."

"That will make me feel so much better when the masers start to kick in."

"I'm not going to argue any more," said Quatrain. "We can either cut a deal, or we can call it quits and go home. If you've got any brains then you're going to believe what I say: as far as human agencies go, those barbs are untraceable, undetectable and unbeatable. They'll hack the security, get you your merchandise and get you out of there. And no one will get hurt."

We both saw him together. Four eyes, one thought: *that's our target.* He was broad as well as tall, rising from the swell of the crowd. His face was sheened with perspiration. Fleshy lips, fleshy jowls, eyes that bulged like someone was inflating his head. He was wearing shorts. That was what sealed his fate: all that exposed flesh.

Quatrain had said that if the worst came to the worst and we couldn't find a suitably outsize target then two normal men would do. McKenzie and I had agreed that if we had to take that option then we would, but neither of us had liked it. We wanted the target to be a single individual and we had both wanted to hit him. It was like a firing squad: a whole bunch of people get to pull the trigger so no one knows for sure who did the killing.

We closed through crowds that seemed five times as dense as before. I'd got this taste in my mouth that was almond and peppermint and petrol: the taste of the triggers. There were fragments on my tongue, little brittle pieces where the false teeth had sheered off. I was absurdly conscious of my hands and the need to prevent them touching anyone else. It was like I had bags of acid hanging off each wrist.

I looked for McKenzie but I couldn't see her. It was much darker than it had been two minutes earlier; like walking through a thunderstorm, except that there was no rain, just this dry electric tingling. I wondered if anyone else was getting this, but no one seemed to be. Maybe it was just me, just something in my eyes.

The only thing I could still see was the light of the display cabinet where the holy nails were kept. It seemed to grow

brighter as the darkness spread everywhere else. I pushed my way towards it, and then something lumbering got into my way. There was so much blackness now it took the best part of ten seconds to realise that it was the target. I ran my palm up the length of his leg. McKenzie was touching him too, but I never knew it then. I only saw it afterwards, on videos.

"What the hell? You some fuckin' faggot?" And then he got a look at my face. "Shit! It's a space freak! There's a fuckin' pervert space freak pawing at my leg! There's a fuckin' -"

He didn't get to say any more, because that was when the blood started coming out of his nose. It came out the way ketchup comes out of a bottle if you hit it really hard, only it wasn't one explosive splat, it was this continuous torrent. My vision was clearing and I could see his mouth moving underneath that waterfall of red.

He was sinking to his knees. I heard myself saying, "Stand back, everybody. Give the guy some room," when what I really wanted to say was, *Get the hell out of here, something awful's happening.* The man was making this noise: no words, just a horrible moaning. The back of his shirt was rippling. I could see it moving like there was a bird trapped underneath; something the size of a sparrow, frantic and panicked, beating its wings against the fabric.

"Go!" I screamed. "For love of God get out of here."

It was then I heard the noise. A lot of people have said it was like gunshots. To me it was more quiet, more organic. It was the kind of noise you'd get if you inflated an airplane sick-bag and then burst it. All the other noises that the man was making stopped. His body slumped with a terrible, terminal stillness . . . except that the shirt on his back was still moving.

I saw the fabric tear. Again, I was reminded of birds, the beak of a new chick puncturing its shell. But it wasn't a beak that was peeling the cloth apart. It was feet, or maybe arms. They were thin and spindly. They looked like bits of wire. They were glistening with something. Not blood, something darker; something like glycerol.

A woman, maybe the big guy's wife, was standing over him. I don't think her presence had anything to do with concern. She was there because she was too disgusted to move. The rent in the shirt was opening like a mouth. There was a second pair of legs now, helping it along. They were half a foot in length, I guess, maybe a little more. They bent back at the 'knees' and tiny claw-like feet were pressed against the flat of the man's back, applying leverage, pulling the body out through the hole.

The head popped out. I *think* it was the head. It was shaped like an outsize button. There was an impression of feathers, although it was hard to see clearly because the thing was so black. It was like your eyes were skidding when you looked at it. There was a beak at one end. I could see a tongue in there, wriggling like a worm.

More body emerging now, squeezing into the light. It looked like the kind of drawing a kid might make by moving a stick through spilled ink. The head was a blob, the body was a bigger one. The legs were little trickling trails of ink and there were far too many of them. They were thrashing and writhing, twisting over each other. That awkward flailing made the thing seem vulnerable, like a newborn deer trying to find its feet.

Then, it jerked itself upright. Its head rotated. I saw something that I did not believe at the time, although subsequent observations of video recordings have proved it to be true. When the creature moved, it left a trail of blackness in its wake. I was reminded of sea birds mired in oil, but the stuff coming out of the creature was not something it had been dipped in. It was not even something that it was secreting.

The blackness it smeared on the air was a fundamental expression of its nature. The darkness was a part of what it was.

I could hear human voices but they sounded far away. They were coming from the back of the crowd, from those who were unable to see and still wanted to know what was happening. Those who were nearer the front had been stunned into silence. Over the top of that silence, I heard a buzzing. Something was blurring in the air around the creature, and I saw for the first time that it had wings. Not like a bird. These were gauzy and translucent, like the delicate wings of a fly. But bigger, a foot across at least. They were expanding, unfolding, spreading like a stain.

The buzzing was intensifying. The creature braced its legs and, far too late, I guessed what was going to happen. When the thing moved, it moved fast. Imagine a ball struck with the perfect arching sweep that is every batsman's dream. The creature moved like that. There was hardly any curve to its trajectory. It burnt across the air leaving a blistered blackness in its wake.

It went straight into attack. It leaped through five and a half feet of air, its body twisting in flight, and slammed its beak and crooked feet into the face of the dead man's wife. Now there were screams. Some of them were coming from the woman and some from people who had just stopped being a crowd and were trying to be a stampede. But there were other sounds too. Those sounds were moist and clotted, like leather being torn. Something warm splattered on my skin and I knew that it was bits of the woman. The creature was pulling her face to pieces, shredding her with its claws.

It was hard to see what was happening, and not just because of the blood. That trail of darkness was spreading. The woman's screaming ended, but her head continued to vibrate. Those glutinous, meaty noises went on and on and on. I could hear something crunching, and the part of my brain that simply never shuts up was saying: *that's her bones you can hear breaking, Karl. That's her bones, or possibly her teeth.* The same part of my brain was insisting on reporting another sound that the rest of me wanted desperately to ignore. Something was popping. Bursting.

Never in all my life have my eyes seemed so heavy. It took more strength than I had known I possessed to drag them from the body of the woman to the man who lay besides her. He was twitching. I could see another tear appearing in his shirt. And another. And another.

I raised my cane and brought it down. Smashing it onto the man's back, trying to break the things which were coming out of his body. I'd like to claim it was courage that kept me there, or even gut revulsion. But it was simpler than that. I did not run because I could not bear the thought of having them come at me from behind.

There are other questions, too. *Why didn't you die like the others? How come you weren't injured? How did you get out of the church?*

I said, "I think it must have been something to do with my eyes."

I didn't know for sure, but it seemed like a reasonable theory. Most people in the church never even saw their attackers. They never saw anything except for blood and darkness. My Ship eyes, which still remembered their makers and the weapons their makers had used, had given me an edge.

And then there was the cane. By the time I staggered out into the daylight the tip of the cane had been blackened and it was giving off wisps of smoke. Part of that was due to me using it to burn through the glass on the cabinet, but most of it was from battering the birds.

There was chaos in the street. Camera crews and ambulances and cops; the whole damn circus of catastrophe. It was like something out of a war film, except that the air smelled of shit and blood and burning rather than popcorn and aftershave. There were crowds of Love People gathered there, too. They always seem to congregate whenever disasters occur. Even the ones so deep into their Ship grafts that they can't even feed themselves will still come running when there's death in the air. In all the bloody news clips from all the bloody wars in all the world you can see them pressing forward, reaching towards the wounded, fixing broken flesh with Staaln technology.

It is hard to know for sure if this is an act of kindness or criminality. The grafts keep people alive who would otherwise not live, but most of the grafted end up as Love People and, in my opinion, that's so close to being dead as makes no difference.

People were being brought out of the church with bird things clinging to them. The light did something bad to the bird flesh; it went up in screaming smoke. But even while they were thrashing and dying, the birds were still tearing with their claws.

I walked through the mess until I found McKenzie. She was half under a blanket. Only half because they hadn't had time to pull it over her face. I sat beside her and pushed the lumps of metal into her hand. I kept trying to fold her fingers over them and they kept on falling back. I was trying to work out what the hell I was supposed to do now. I suppose if I'd been like Mac the answer would have been obvious: it was my task to find another woman and persuade her to do what McKenzie would have done. But I couldn't imagine how I was meant to do it. I couldn't imagine anything, not now McKenzie was gone.

"You make it sound like you thought she was dead." It was Lydia speaking to me. Unlike Lainier, Lydia seldom paced around my cell. Mostly, she would sit across the table from me, hands almost touching mine. Her voice was always kind and understanding. Without my eyes I might not have known about the loathing she worked so hard to hide.

"She was alive later on," I said, knowing I was dodging the question. The truth is, I've seen enough dead people in my time: I'm not going to be mistaken about it. Heather McKenzie was dead. Which makes the fact that she was breathing when I slipped my arms under her shoulders and picked her off the ground an impossibility. One more of many. Getting out of the city with the cops of three countries looking for us ought to have been impossible, as should reconstituting the DNA from the dried blood on the nails. But these things all got done.

"You loved her, didn't you?" said Lydia.

"I still do love her."

"There a sex thing between you?" said Lainier. He was leaning against the wall, looking pretty awful. I knew why he was asking, but the question still repelled me. I tilted my face to the light, which I figured was as good an answer as any. Maybe he thought so as well.

"Do you think she loved you?" said Lydia. Always the soft voice, always the gentle question, but there is more blood on her soul than on Lainier's, she just carries it more lightly.

"I think she cared about me. She probably still does."

"So why did you betray her?" said Lainier.

"I didn't betray her."

"You made the call. You told us where you were, how we could come and get you."

"That's all true," I said.

"So why? Why did you do that, Karl?"

"You've been spending time with her, haven't you?"

Not an answer, nothing like an answer, just the first thing I could think of to distract him; just a way to hit him that would hurt.

"How do you know that?"

I had a desperate urge to ask how she was doing, how the baby was doing. "And now you're sleeping badly. All those dreams. Those awful, *awful* dreams." I can see the residue of them in his eyes. It's like looking in a mirror.

"Is that why you betrayed her?" he asked me. "Because of the dreams? Because of the memories?"

"The dreams aren't memories." I could see he didn't want to follow that up. The dreams were in his head; he did not want to think about what they were or what they might portend. "They're going to get worse you know. All that fire and bloodshed, all that screaming. Every night a little bit worse than the last."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he said, but I could tell he did. There are some things that simply can't be hidden. He knew that I woke up screaming in the middle of the night, and I knew that he woke up the same way. He knew because there are cameras in the cell which watch me twenty-four hours a day. And I knew because I could see what it was doing to him. I could see it the same way that I saw flames whenever I closed my eyes.

"Is that why you gave her up to us?" This time it was Lydia asking that same question. "Because of the bad dreams?"

"That was part of it," I said. I was hoping I would not have to say any more. There are some things that are just too hard to admit. The truth is: I betrayed her because I could not make myself kill her. I had stood by her bed with a knife in my hand and watched the curve of her body under the sheets. There was sweat in her hair and tears on her cheeks. She looked worn out and miserable, as pale as if a piece of the moon had crashed onto her pillow. I held the knife an inch from her throat and my mind was shouting *Do it! Do it!* but my arm refused to move.

I told her about it later, tears running down my face. "I wanted to kill you. Oh sweet Jesus, how I wanted to kill you." She touched my hand for the first time since the church and said, "I wish to God you'd done it."

Betraying her had seemed like the best way of achieving what we could not do for ourselves. I should have guessed that things would not work out. We had both believed that the nature of our crimes would mean the death penalty for both of us. This turned out to be half right. They are going to execute me by some suitably exemplary means, but they will not harm McKenzie, not until the child is born. The court dressed it up in some noble-sounding guff about not punishing the unborn, but everyone knew that was bullshit. It was an engineered baby, cooked up from dead blood; by the standards of the court it had no more right to life than a lump of dead experimental tissue. The judges had spared the baby's life, and consequently that of McKenzie because they were afraid. They were afraid that the nails might really be what Mark Uraboni claimed they were, that the baby might really be what we had thought it was. No one wanted to go down in history as a second Pontious Pilate.

I knew something was wrong when Lydia came in on her own. There is no time in my cell, but I got the idea that it was later than usual. I also got the idea that she'd been crying.

"Robert's dead," she said. I don't know if she meant to blurt it out like that; she was good enough that it could have been part of an act but I don't believe it was.

"Robert?" I said.

"Robert Lainier." The tears were close to the surface, and

I realised that there must have been something between them, something I hadn't known about before.

"What happened?"

"He killed himself." Straight out, no effort to soften it. "Because of you. Because of what you said."

I had no idea what she meant.

"About the dreams. Because of what you said about the dreams."

"All I did was tell the truth." It was all I'd ever done, but there wasn't much point in saying so again. "I said the dreams would get worse. He killed himself because he knew they would. Worse and worse, night after night, until the child is born."

"You can't know that," breathed Lydia. There was horror in her voice, and it occurred to me that Lainier and I might not be the only ones who were suffering nightmares.

"No, I can't know it. But I believe it to be true."

My beliefs have been responsible for some of the worst errors in my life. I had believed that having Ship eyes would be preferable to blindness; that McKenzie heard the voice of God; that Mark Uraboni was wrong to use the Nails of The Crucifixion as a way of making money; that it was possible to grow God in a test tube. No, I had not just believed that was possible, I had believed that it was necessary and right.

We had both of us believed it.

"God will not come back," McKenzie had insisted. "Not without an effort of our own. The Kingdom can only be restored if human beings work to make it happen."

Well, we had worked. We had plotted and planned and purchased. We had committed murder on a scale which even the bloody-handed old monster of the Old Testament might not have been ashamed of. We had managed to grow *something*, but each day I grow more certain that it's far from being God.

The blood on the nails was human, human enough to kindle life in McKenzie's belly, but how much does that mean? My steel Staaln eyes are human enough to bleed images into my brain. The Ship tech that turns Love People into addicts is human enough to integrate with their nerves and eventually their souls. Maybe the Staaln were human enough to want to go on living when they found themselves dying in the lonely dark of space. A race that can build for a million years can plan on the same scale. They can plan their own deaths in the hope that one day fools like us will bring them back.

I would say these things to Lydia if I thought that she would listen, or if I thought her listening would do us any good. But I don't. It's all gone wrong and there's no way now to set it right again. The child is there, and growing even faster than my nightmares. It is alive and does not want to die. Lydia can ask me all the questions she wants, but there is nothing new to say. In a couple of days time, they will take me out and kill me. The thought of my own ending comes as a relief: at least I will not have to see the thing that McKenzie and I created out of death and good intentions.

Lydia keeps on talking but all I can hear is babies crying, crying, crying. She leans towards me all I can smell is blood and shit and gun-smoke. I close my eyes and stare into the flames.

Jeremy Minton is technically a child of the sixties, though most of his useful memories begin with *Grease* and Jeff Wayne's *War of the Worlds*. He is married and lives in Berkshire where he works as a programmer to try and close the gap between his desire for a champagne lifestyle and the money he gets for writing. His previous writing credits include stories on the *Alternate Species* webzine and a novelette in *F&SF*. He likes France, cooking, snooker, and the music of Tom Waits, and one of his most prized possessions is a picture of himself in a cage with a horse's head and a fifteen month old lion.



"For me the book is full of physical geography, only not in the sense of a map or a kit you could follow – more as an intuited shape, grown into by the characters. I suppose they dwell in

On the evidence of his recent reading at the London Review Bookshop (which was sold out to the point where audience members were standing at the back), Jonathan Lethem has finally gained the popular reputation that his writing deserves.

A master of boundary crossing, Jonathan Lethem has become well known as a writer of strange fiction that makes you look at the world in a new way, occasionally removing the markers that are taken for granted by the reader and refashioning them in an intriguing way.

He lives in Brooklyn, where he was born and raised, and has written six novels, collections of short stories and has also contributed to *McSweeney's*, *New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*. *The Fortress of Solitude* (Faber & Faber), tells the story of two friends, Dylan Ebdus and Mingus Rude (one white and one black), and their entwined lives as they grow up in an area that is on the verge of gentrification. Together they invent a superhero called Aeroman, based on the comics that they read and collect. However, matters come to a tragic head and their lives are sundered for a while until Dylan returns to discover what happened to his friend and neighbourhood.

The New York of *The Fortress of Solitude* is more of a backdrop than physical entity; there is little physical geography in terms of the YOU ARE HERE markers on the map. "For me the book is full of physical geography, only not in the sense of a map or a kit you could follow – more as an intuited shape, grown into by the characters. I suppose they dwell in

it as a fish does in the ocean – that is to say, without the use of any depth charts."

It is a novel which is "hugely autobiographical in emotion, and milieu – the world, culture, schools, music, and city that I knew as I came of age. But deceptive in terms of character and event – the book invites a simple identification of Dylan and myself, yet I don't feel our relationship is so simple. My own personality, and my own responses to the experience of Brooklyn in the 70s is strewn throughout the characters. Big parts of me are in Arthur, and Mingus, and, especially, Abraham. Conversely, there are aspects of my brother and of several of my closest friends which are as crucial to defining Dylan as anything in myself.

"I'd say that *Girl In Landscape* is equally autobiographical, in any important sense. Between each of the two books that preceded this one, I built the foundation for *Fortress*. So I see it more as a culmination than a change."

Lethem still lives close to a friend from his first grade in Brooklyn and I asked him whether this influenced or hindered him, given the subject matter. "I've been incredibly lucky with friends and family, in terms of having resources as a writer which reconnect me, deeply, to the places I've lived, to versions of my own life I'd temporarily abandoned. Karl, my best friend from first grade, is one of the most important. Disguise was never important, because fiction is such a radical and fundamental and total transformation of any fact or experience which comes within its grasp."

There is an episode in the novel where Dylan, Mingus and Arthur

discover a spaldeen (a highly bouncy rubber ball) and end up playing in the street, reverting to a childhood game of ball. "I think the spaldeen functions as a kind of master key. Certainly the essential feeling about childhood in the book is that it is always being lost and mourned, even by children. Since the book isn't history or autobiography but fiction, memory's embellishments were as important to ratify as any 'facts' themselves. I didn't struggle over that distinction. The subject of the book seemed most alive to me, often, at the junctures where memory was betrayed, where different people disagreed over the memory of certain events, where the distortions of emotion and necessity were revealed in their intensity."

What is striking about this latest novel is that it is so 'realistic', although it is neither history or biography, as opposed to much of his earlier work and that Lethem has very much come into his own voice in this book. "As with every choice I've made as a fiction writer, I did it out of love. I wanted to write a novel like those I'd adored: full of the scrupulous texture of everyday life, as big and chaotic and detailed as a city itself, or as a childhood actually is. Like certain novels by Dickens, Christina Stead, Philip Roth, Henry Roth, James Baldwin, Stephen Millhauser. It wasn't until now that I felt I'd gathered the tools I needed, as a writer, to do justice to this impulse. For me the more metaphorical, and abstract, and mythic, and cartoonish ways of depicting my experience were available sooner."

I did wonder whether he had found this departure leading to un-

Jonathan Lethem

talks to Iain Emsley about his novel *The Fortress of Solitude*

rown into by the characters. I suppose they dwell in it as a fish does in the ocean – that is to say, without the use of any depth charts.”

comprehending reviews and a difficult reception and how he felt about the reviews that were being run about *Fortress of Solitude*. “Each book has made some radical departure from the precedent of the earlier ones, so I’ve become accustomed to a certain bumpiness as my readers – either gratefully or resentfully – expand their sense of what I’m likely to want to do in my work. The audience has grown, and it seems to me that with *Fortress* the degree of excitement has grown, and for that I’m grateful.

“As I said before, I do it out of love. The categories which fascinate others mostly irritate me, where they are even visible – but for the most part, I’m blind to them, blind out of sheer enthusiasm. Certainly it begins with the eclecticism of my reading appetites, but also of my childhood experience across a range of stimuli – people, music, films, and perhaps especially paintings. My reading habits haven’t changed, or rather they’re always changing, never set. I only wish I had as much time to read as I used to – that’s the price of growing up, getting a career as a published writer (which is otherwise a blessing!).”

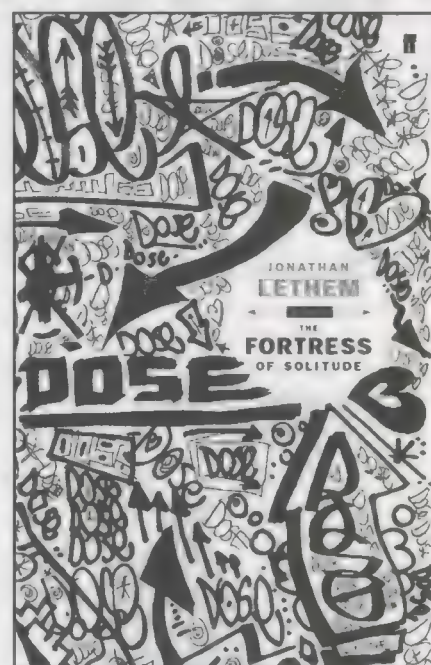
Dylan creates the superhero character, Aeroman, which Mingus also adopts as a fellow reader of comics. This appears to be a shared experience with the *Escapist*, created in Michael Chabon’s *Amazing Adventure of Kavalier and Clay*. Was this so and did he have to be careful to retain his own authorial voice? “I’m a big fan of Chabon’s book. I don’t have a particular policy about reading contemporaries – I try to read whatever amuses, inspires, and nourishes me.

There’s certainly never a question of ‘distance to maintain my own voice’ – influence is a vital part of my work.

“I loved superheroes as I was growing up, loved them so much I imagined I was always about to meet one, or become one. I suppose I was writing about this love and its disappointment at the same time. Dylan’s a character who’s very slow to recognize his own complicity, and so it comes as a shock to him to understand how he’s participated in the lives of the other characters. And, of course, the superhero is a fantasy of vindication and revenge, as often as not.”

Lethem still reads some comics. “I love a lot of the great ‘graphic novelists’ who’ve come along, more in the underground world than in the traditional comics category – Chester Brown, Dan Clowes, etc. I read traditional comics nostalgically, for the most part. But I’m always ready for something great to come along and change that.”

Abraham (Dylan’s father) takes Dylan to a talk given by a filmmaker and finds that both of them are disappointed by the experience. On their way back to the subway, Abraham notices a tramp that has been ‘tagged’ graffiti style and recognises it as his son’s work. “I think art is really at the center of the book – every character has some kind of yearning relationship to the role of the artist, wanting to be one, or be a critic, or a fan, or all at once. Really, the role of the artist is a kind of superheroism, an attempt to transform oneself and become impressive, loveable, formidable – to turn one’s own freakishness into something sublime.”



THE FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE
Jonathan Lethem

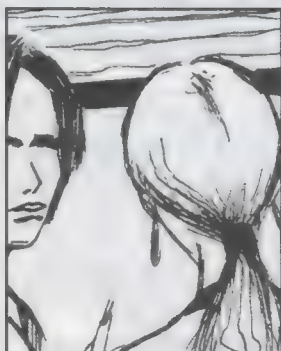
Faber & Faber pb, 528pp, £12.99

‘The stunning new novel from the author of *Motherless Brooklyn*, *The Fortress of Solitude* spans thirty years in the lives of its characters, and in the life of a neighbourhood in Brooklyn. Within these pages too are the history of soul music, of graffiti art, of experimental film and “rock writing”, and other possibly even more dubious forms of cultural activity.

The novel has a cast of over a hundred characters, more than fifty speaking parts. These include two sets of sons and fathers: Mingus Rude and Barrett Rude Jr, and Dylan and Abraham Ebdus. And those four alone will break your heart.’



pictures on a cafe wall story by damian kilby



one

PICTURE ME IN THAT ABSURDLY OVERSIZED CITY. I'M UP ON A ROOFTOP, standing on the very broad parapet beside my easel, slashing and then smudging my brushes against a canvas. Crisp light pours down from a purple-blue sky that has never known pollution.

I'm trying to capture, in gesture and color, something of the presence of the huge beast napping at the center of a courtyard, two buildings over. Down on its haunches, long neck curving round so that its massive lizard head rests on the tip of its coiled tail, I'm sure it reaches to at least the height of eight stories. Its scales glimmer with flecks of gold and green.

"What's this?"

I start. Brush hand twitches. There's a man standing behind me, speaking.

"I don't think I have ever seen anyone painting here, anywhere in the city. And I have lived here a long time."

The speaker is broad-shouldered and middle aged, wearing a simple brown robe. His long hair and full beard are a reddish-brown and his green-flecked, gray eyes are keen and appraising.

Can you picture me gaping at him? And then saying, "What else can I do, but paint these things?"

"What can you do? Well, people come to the city for tangible gain," he answers. "Magic and power and wealth. But, in your way, I suppose, you too attempt to gain something from our dragons."

He reaches out to shake hands.

He introduces himself as Vernor Beirelle. His confident manner makes him easy to talk to, so I show him other canvases, all acrylic studies of great lizards. His comments on my technique are appreciative and generous, which leads me to reveal that I've crossed over from my own world several times: "But haven't spoken to anyone. Barely noticed people really – lurking about like a man in a dream. I'm used to being alone with my work."

I've painted dragons before. On the covers of paperback novels, the occasional role-playing game card. Just a few of the many, many jobs that have paid the rent. I love my work as an illustrator and am generally content with the long hours of solitude. There's pleasure in the feel of charcoal on paper, in the texture of acrylics or oils spread over the weave of canvas. I've never had special ambitions and the work of fine artists leaves me unmoved. It's the materials and the process I care about.

These days I'm especially glad to have the work fill my waking hours. Anything to avoid the endless, pitiful self-examination over my wife Joan and our impending divorce.

Beirelle becomes even more enthusiastic upon learning that I'm visiting from another world. He gushes about gateways, portals, mighty finding spells. "Usually," he says, "these are attained at great cost to the conjurer."

"My way through," I say, "is less a gateway and more a crack – in the foundation of the old warehouse where I rent studio space."

So picture me in the wizard's lair. My paintings are strapped to my back, folded-up easel under one arm. I step carefully: Beirelle's chambers are crowded with objects and artifacts. Am I eager, anxious, embarrassed? Do I even want to make a new friend right now?

The stairs, coming down, were narrow, roughly cut into the dense stone of the rooftop. One room leads to the next, like an old fashion railroad flat. This wall is constructed of intricate hand-carved wood panels, the next is a slapped together lattice of pole and plaster, painted over in a streaky yellow. There's the occasional small, round window built into the floor, providing murky views down into the depths of a dragon-sized chamber.

Beirelle pauses along the way to pick up different artifacts – he just holds them for a second or two – but never lets me touch anything. Most seem to incorporate bits of dragon scale, claw, or tooth. Some look like weapons, others feature quirky geometric structures, intriguing bits of abstract sculpture.

"I'm a successful collector and interpreter of what the city has to offer," he tells me.

We move through more storage chambers, a kitchen, sleeping quarters and on to the library where we settle into high-backed, stuffed chairs. An apprentice brings

steaming mugs of a milky brew that smells like chestnuts. Beirelle tells me that the books, which overflow from the floor-to-ceiling shelves, contain the records, notes and theories of generations of adepts and scholars. One apprentice's entire job is to write out copies.

"Fascinating," I say. "The whole city is. For a visit . . . But I wonder, why live here? The place isn't designed for humans. It's uncomfortable. It's like being an insect."

"You seem to see everything from the wrong angle. Consider ambition. We come to the city to make something of ourselves. As you see here, some of us are very successful."

He names the villages his apprentices hail from and then sketches in a picture of his own birthplace with its single dirt track and row of hovels.

"Seems to me that the only choice for an intelligent boy is to make the journey here. Learn what you can, take what you can. There are plenty who are content to snatch a little of the dragons' leftover magicks and then leave. They end up as village witch men or wise women. But how can you not get caught up in the mysteries of the city's titans?"

Many – like my host – spend their lives building up skills and knowledge, tracing out intricate maneuvers amongst themselves, while always trying to move on to the next level of power.

"The world outside holds nothing for me now," he explains. "Of course, few become adepts – and even we can wield only the merest fraction of the magic that is the very stuff of the dragons' existence. The others, the rest of the humans here, simply survive, stumbling along day-to-day, understanding little."

"But – " I say, hardly able to connect with his vision of the city, struggling to formulate a perspective of my own.

Beirelle laughs at my difficulty in accepting the true nature of things. Laughs with the assurance of a man who understands and embraces life in all its ugly details and takes a practical kind of pleasure in squeezing what he can out of such a world. He's really enjoying his laugh.

"You still lack the correct point of view," he says. "Dragons are the center of everything that makes the world. We little creatures must make the best of the situation."

Once, he explains, they occupied every corner of the world; playing with the weather, causing mountains to rise, breathing life into forests, creating and recreating animal forms. Though the supply of dragon magic was staggering, it was finite. Slowly draining away, without chance of renewal. The dragons sensed their loss late into the process. Facing the fact of their impending extinction, they summoned up what would be their last animal creation – humans. Tiny creatures with brains enough to sense the dragons' will and hands to carry out a multitude of tasks: most essentially the construction of the city. Over the millennia the dragon population shrank, their numbers a direct measure of the magic left in the world. In their wake the human population grew and spread out, grubbing a meager existence from land now leached of magic. The world is essentially dragon free, the last ten thousand or so having retreated behind the walls of their city. Someday, not too far off, the very last of the great creatures will collapse, magical essence gone, great bones petrified and melded into the earth.

"Then my friend – true emptiness. Cause and essence absent. Then the world will make no sense."

Beirelle laughs again.

We sip quietly for a while.

Later, he says, "I'm interested in adding one of your paintings to my collection. Can I interest you in a trade?"

I accept a copy of one of the books on his shelves. An untitled volume, just the size of my hand, containing – he claims –

notes on folklore gathered by a scholarly apprentice a few generations back.

Picture me at home, in bed, with my new book in my hands. Safe and secure in my own lair, my own familiar world, surrounded by all my own stuff. There's something pleasing about having the bed all to myself. Cozy and freeing at the same time, every moment just for me.

Then, of course, I feel the deep chill. The loneliness – which had felt so grand a few seconds ago – echoes around me and through all the well-ordered rooms of the apartment.

This is the way of it every night since she asked me to leave.

Open this book. It may keep my mind focused on that other place. The pages are slick and stiff. Not made from paper. I can't identify the material – proof that this really is something I've brought back from another reality.

It's packed with short biographical entries, put down in no discernible order. I'd guess that these are notes for a larger work, drawn from numerous and contradictory sources.

Every entry I look at seems to embody the failure of love. Lonely, unfulfilled lives seem to pile up before me. The combination of human nature and the larger forces at work around the people in this book pretty much guarantees them a pointless, empty and brief existence.

I drag myself out from under the covers and tuck the book into the bottom drawer of my dresser, under the pile of sweaters. I'm not sure I should ever read from it again. And I'm not sure how I'm going to fall asleep tonight.

Two

JOHAN RAISON: FEARED BUT OVERREACHING ADEPT.

There are stories which claim he discovered magical pathways into the minds of dragons. They tell of dragons' thoughts resembling jagged mountain ranges. A single concept would take Raison days to traverse. Often he came skidding and tumbling down without having apprehended a single clear notion. Yet it appears that Raison did gain many unusual powers. He could cloak himself in total silence; he could lie in fire without being burned; he was able to fly when the moon was full. He is credited with the destruction of the Silver Circle band of witches. He is also credited with the once popular theory that the city is merely a construct within the mind of a dragon on a thousand year flight between the stars. Yet other sources emphasize how his conversation and public statements became extremely muddled and random, to the point where he gave the impression of being the embodiment of disassociation and chaos. In the end he burst into flame while in mid-flight, his shadow seared white into the side of a windowless tower.

Sevine Gohlach: Appears in some of the Johan Raison stories, usually as his lover. She is said to have been a direct creation of a dragon's mind; a dragon's idea of woman, brought forth into the world. One source explains that she was sent to live in the city to help draw humans back into the realm of pure thought. This may have been a kind of conversion of humanity into a source of fuel to power further dragon magic. She became passionately attached to Johan Raison and deserted her mission. Instead she worked to aid her lover in his dream of becoming the most powerful of adepts. She revealed to him an access way to the essential nature of the dragons, a doorway into dragon thought. This knowledge, it is believed, assured

his ultimate doom. All versions of the story agree that after his death she lost the faculties of speech and sight. She wandered the streets trying to communicate by making signs with her hands; none could interpret these signals. In time a passing dragon stepped on her.

three

I VENTURE DOWN, BELOW, TO GROUND LEVEL. HERE

is a street wide enough for two dragons to walk abreast, made from huge flat stones, each as broad as a two lane road back in my world. The cracks between the stones are mud-filled ravines. I can't see how human hands ever put this together; though men and women do walk along these alleys and avenues. Human traffic presses close to the edges, brushing up against the sides of the buildings. There are lone travelers and groups, dressed in tunics and cloaks of varying degrees of finery and cleanliness. Human drawn carts pass more quickly, carrying large men dressed in scarlet or purple robes, busy consulting the scrolls and books balanced on their knees. I see a man creep into the center of the street and open a man-hole cover and then drop down within. I see beggars: a blind girl, a man whose legs have been amputated below the knees, a child with a mud smeared face. Only once does a dragon stroll past. The air buzzes against the surrounding buildings, the stone shakes under my hiking boots. Great claws come down in front of me and I hold my breath during the intervals between each of its long footsteps.

My wife – soon to be ex-wife – Joan drops by my studio with an exhaustive list of odds and ends from the house, suggesting I make check marks by the items I'm interested in. This is only the second time I've seen her since our separation, and I'm anxious, wanting her to think well of me. But this list seems suspect, more a provocation to a fight than a helpful gesture. I resolve to not lay claim to any item she might conceivably want, to prove my noble spirit under duress. I'd always imagined that if our relationship were to end it would be me walking away, that she was clearly the needy, clinging one. Instead I have been rejected and now it is I who lingers over her every expression and intonation, worrying about what she thinks of me. So I show her the painting I'm working on. It's a brightly colored rendering of a pirate, to be used in an ad campaign for a certain brand of chewing tobacco. The pirate has broad shoulders, a bushy brownish-red beard and penetrating gray – flecked with green – eyes. She shrugs, then tries to murmur something polite. I quickly pull out three canvases from my series of dragon portraits. These are all close-in views of the great lizards, sleeping or staring into the sky. One even shows a dragon peering out from a doorway. She makes appreciative noises about the colors; says they're intriguing, a nice change from my commercial work; she thinks she sees an eye here, the line of a grinning mouth; she looks uncertain, half turns away from the pictures. My heart sinks a little. She doesn't see the awesome, terrifying creatures I've tried to capture. I'd hoped that in some indefinable way she could partake in my journey of the past few weeks.

I turn a corner and witness a dragon preparing to lift off into flight. It's in an intersection, three blocks ahead of me, unfurling membranous wings. Black wings, already reaching above the rooftops, seeming to drain the street of light. Wind rips down the broad avenue as if sucking in toward a vacuum.

Humans scramble and grasp at the edges of bricks. A wizard's cart tumbles over. With neck and head stretching straight up, it rises, wings vibrating and humming, not flapping – this is more a violent rending of reality than the stuff of aerodynamics and physical law. It takes command of the sky. I am frozen in place, unable to look away or think of anything else: this creature needs no explanation, no reason beyond the fact of its existence. Though it may be oblivious to my presence, the dragon owns me. High above, now, it spits out fire, a great stream, arcing toward the sun. After a moment the line of flame begins to fall, slowly breaking up, extinguishing in sections, the remaining fiery blobs raining down upon a distant section of the city.

four

INTERVIEW WITH A MADWOMAN:

A: I do sleep outside. I live on the streets. I'm used to it. See, this is my bag. Look here. Here's my clock. This is my mirror. So I know what's going on. With myself. This is my favorite pair of shoes.

A: I beg. I can eat garbage. No one notices me. Except when I start screaming. Do you want to see how loud I can get? I used to think maybe even the dragons would notice me. Everyone wants the dragons to notice them. As if the dragons could love you. As if they would make you special and change your life forever.

A: No. I don't worry about that. You can feel them coming from blocks away. The vibrations. And up close they have those cold auras. Makes my skin prickle. You don't know much, do you. Only the stupid ones get caught under foot. You're not stupid are you? I don't think so . . . because I like this painting. You don't seem stupid. Now the fire is a different matter. If a bit of lizard fire is going to fall on you . . . there's nothing you can do to stop it. It gets every kind of person. Falls upon, I mean. A splash of the fire falls down from the sky and just like that it's over. No matter how important. No matter how busy you are.

A: I was not born here. Came of my own free will. Stupid girl. Like all the rest. Didn't want to live on the farm. Sharing bed with brothers and sisters, sheep and ducks. Then grow up, spend life getting pregnant, sharing bed with husband and children and goats and chickens.

A: I'll tell you. I will tell you – the dragons come from right out of our own minds! We dreamed them up ourselves. And now we can't get rid of them. How could things like them be real? Doesn't make sense. But we want them. To chase after. Men want power, lots of sex, big bulges in their britches, magic at their fingertips, hundreds of ladies to love them. And the women, the ladies. Want beautiful nests, dragon palaces, magical pets, giant beds. I wanted a great big, very big, room of my own. Thousands of soft blankets. Maybe a little quiet music. So. We are trapped with the dragons. We drool over dragons. We can't get rid of them. They only seem in control. No one is in control.

A: I would like that picture, that painting, please. It reminds me of the first one I ever saw up-close. It was sleeping and I

was very brave. I stood so close that I couldn't see it's whole face. Then its eye opened. But it couldn't see me. I was too close, like a piece of dust. You know.

five

AN EMAIL FROM THE ART DIRECTOR OF A LEADING GAMING COMPANY:

'As you noted yourself, we don't have much need for close-ups of dragon faces. In the other images your proportions seem off. Such long necks, carrying such oversized heads. Those long tails, like whips in motion . . . interesting but it doesn't work. Can't really picture an elvish warrior trying to slay one of these things. Or a circle of dwarves dancing in its shadow. But do send me more stuff. Looking for ideas for alien soldiers. We've got a couple different interstellar wars brewing right now.'

six

SO. ONCE UPON A TIME I'M DOWN AT THE STREET level, working on a watercolor sketch of a series of towers, placed at the forking of two broad avenues, when this short, wiry guy struts up to me and says: "You need to paint spiders too!"

He's wearing dusty, stained gray clothes, trousers tucked into heavy leather boots. He has wild, thinning hair and a narrow face which scrunches up as he speaks.

"Only get the dragons, you only get half the picture."

I've been coming down here, to the streets over and over, driven by the need to put the reality of the dragons and their city into perspective. To make sense of it all visually. I have been scouting plazas and intersections, sketching promising locations, looking for telling juxtapositions. I don't like being down on this level of the city. It's a necessity to take each new step. To keep painting.

So, I shake hands with this guy. Apparently I'm still missing half the picture.

"The name's Aaron." He holds up a long sword with a saw-tooth edge and an extra hooked blade branching off near the tip. "Designed for battle with the spiders."

"Spiders? They must be big ones," I say.

"Not so big I can't kill them." He goes on about spider hunters and a war going on under our feet. It's like coming in on the middle of a very long story and I don't get most of the references. "Just come down with me into the sewers. You'll see stuff will open your eyes."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Seeing is believing. And understanding. Won't be so dangerous. It's a kind of danger I'm a master of. And you get to paint the spiders."

I pack up my stuff and follow this Aaron fellow through an open manhole and down a long ladder. So I feel reckless and stupid – but I still feel like I must go on.

Underground, with a smoldering torch in each hand, my guide is busy bragging about his swordsmanship. He skips through odorous streams; rushes – bent over double – down mold-encrusted tunnels; finally hops and twirls out into a cavernous chamber where sweet-smelling fresh water flows.

"This level is all ours. Not a spider left."

I stand panting, trying to reach a cramped muscle in my lower back. He's swinging the torches to and fro – I think he's recreating a particularly invigorating battle. These lower depths are constructed on a more human scale, which is a kind of relief: on the other hand I'm pretty sure that I've already lost all sense of direction.

"The magic wand guys, the adepts, don't think much of spider hunters. But what do they know about our position in the order of things? We work directly for the dragons. It's a special relationship and hunters lay claim to special rewards."

We plunge into another hole, then jog through tunnels that swoop and curve on down below the waterworks. Damp gusts of air blow through these passages. My clothes are sticking to my skin. And I've lost sight of Aaron around a bend. There's just a dull glow up ahead. I hurry forward till I'm right behind him again. Feeling jittery. But this level is where we are going to see what we came for. We've passed on into dry earthen barrows. Loose dirt slides out under my every step.

"There. Right over there."

He thrusts a torch into my hand and then takes off, waving his sword, skidding down a steep slope. Coming closer I see that Aaron has a hairy, black spider cornered. It stands about chest high and is as broad as three men. It's very ugly. When a bug is this large it's hard to look at. Even harder on the ears with its incessant scratchy chittering.

Aaron swings his blade in a wide arc and the spider dodges by squatting down low. It lunges at him and he manages to jump back out of reach. It spits out webbing, lashing his sword against his own leg, causing him to tumble. I rush forward: my moment of heroics. My legs feel numb.

And I drag him back from its next lunge. The spider isn't moving very fast, it seems to me. As if its heart isn't in going for the kill. Now it scuttles backward, compressing legs against body to squeeze itself through a narrow hole. Gone from sight.

Aaron struggles with the webbing for a moment and then gets his blade moving, rip-sawing through the layered strands.

"Shaking a little?" he asks. "It's good for you. The sight of the things gets on your nerves?"

"Well . . ."

"Don't worry. We're winning. Making history, level after level."

He leads me on. More dusty warrens, more damp, slimy passages. After some time we come upon a troop of men who've captured a dozen spiders in basket-like traps. They plunge blades into the creatures in a business-like fashion and then hook the stiff spider corpses with the curved part of their swords and drag them over to a pit, under a vertical air shaft, where they soak the bodies in oil and then burn them.

These spider hunters are caked in grime and they grin with tightly clenched jaws. They make a nod or two in our direction, but mostly ignore us.

"Only thing the old dragons fear are the spiders," Aaron says, backing up a step from the crackling flames. "They freak out at the sight of them. Some say spider magic short-circuits dragon magic. Makes them scream and spit fire out in random directions. It's the only thing they need our help with."

Now we trudge up to a higher level and come to an unmarked door in a stone wall. This is Aaron's personal quarters. "My hideaway."

Within is a series of circular rooms. There are heaps of aged furniture, a row of chipped and cracked stone carvings and stacks of oversized hand weapons. All is lit by flickering sparks coming from insects trapped in translucent boxes.

"Hunters get all the space we want. Access to lots of the old treasures," he says. "You might want to make some sketches

in my trophy room.”

I pull out a large pad of newsprint, some compressed charcoal and a white pastel crayon. He has me help him move the mummified corpse of a spider. This one is half-again as big as the one he battled earlier. One of its quill-like black hairs stabs my finger, drawing blood. I’m sucking on my finger while Aaron’s striking poses by the spider.

“What you’ve got to know,” he tells me, while I lay down some initial gesture lines, “is that a long time back the spiders were just as big as dragons. Half the world was choked with their webbing. Only dragon fire could break through it, back in those times. Even nowadays a spider’s bite can kill a dragon. Long, slow death.

“There were these mind-boggling wars, hundreds of years long. The dragons got tired of the fighting. They prefer more time for thinking, contemplating. So they built this city, with a spell condensed together from their collective magic. A giant walled fortress, easily defended. At least from above.

“Spiders were stymied for a while – they live for conflict. Then they found a strategy, using their own kind of magic – shrunk themselves down, smaller and smaller, so that they could dig their way under the city unnoticed. The shrinking was a tactical error, though. They lost most of their intelligence. The smaller, the dumber. Now they mostly run on instinct. Probably can’t remember why they’re trying to get into the city. Man, they get easier to kill all the time. I can’t tell you how many hundreds I’ve personally exterminated.”

Extermination or just assembly line butchering, I’m thinking. I’ve made some smudgy scribbles, but I’m finding I have no stomach for rendering the spider in great detail. Focusing on the man is much more compelling. I’d like to capture the kinetic intensity of his facial expressions, the passion – and delusion – with which he grips his sword.

An hour more of drawing passes. My concentration is lagging. I’ve done all I can. I set aside my pad and offer Aaron a densely rendered version of himself holding up the sword, gripping it intensely with both hands.

“I’m exhausted. Can you please get me back up to the surface,” I beg.

seven

IN MY MIND’S EYE I CARRY AROUND THE IDEA OF A self-portrait, one that’s probably beyond my abilities. It would be of myself posed on one of the dragon city’s rooftops. A painting that captures the look of a man who has wandered this city for days: he looks a bit dazzled, but overlaying that is the confidence of someone who has ventured into unknown territories and discovered he can cope with them. I’d like to be able to give a sense of the new man lifting out of the old. I’ve made some studies of the light I’d like to use in such a composition: shifting, subtly prismatic bands of sunlight, reflecting off various exotic materials in the ranks of giant buildings which stretch on out to the horizon.

I am impressed by one of my own portraits, made during my period of wandering, of a youngish woman named Renee.

She stands straight up, eight-month old baby daughter held against her hip. Renee is wide-boned but thinly muscled, wearing a dappled and faded green dress, long hair tied loosely behind her neck. In the background her seven year old son, Bram, peers out from behind a trunk. They are posed inside their nest-like home: a conglomeration of scraps of wood,

logs and sticks, held together with rope and plaster, attached up under the eaves of a very large dragon meeting hall. (In fact her home vibrates steadily with the muffled rumble of dragon movements and low dragon voices.) Looking at this painting I am pleased to see how I captured some of her sadness, her lost-yet-stubbornly-carrying-on quality, all in the set of her facial muscles, her posture, the quality of the light reflected off her skin and her eyes. There was a moment, in the middle of painting, when I had the urge to embrace her and kiss her lips, her whole face, as if I could kiss away sadness. Instead I kept working.

She posed for me three different times, her payment was her choice from among my now considerable collection of dragon portraits. She was delighted with the one she picked out and considered herself to have gotten the better part of the bargain.

While I try to paint, and see her properly, she tells me her tale of coming to the dragon city for all the usual reasons. She hooked up with a small time wizard, learned a few magic tricks from him, got pregnant, bore him a son. He located this relatively private home for her. Not long after that he was killed, blasted by a dragon who caught him creeping too close.

Following that she spent years devoting herself solely to Bram, doing a little housework for the wealthier adepts, avoiding dragons and magic, and doing her best to ignore any interest from men. Less than two years ago, a persistent, ambitious and idealistic apprentice named Winnow broke through her barriers and she let herself fall in love. They had some brief moments of joy; but he ached with the belief that he had to succeed in a big way, to support her, to prove himself worthy. This need of his reached a breaking point when she became pregnant with his child.

He discovered records of a portal into the city’s own future. With this and other information he devised a plan where he would be able to leap ahead into the future, steal away a fabulous instrument of magic, and return to Renee’s side after only the passing of a few seconds in her relative time frame. She was three months pregnant when he plunged through the gateway. And she returned to that portal every day till she gave birth to Winnow’s daughter. Surely he was lost for good. But there was no way anyone could know for sure. She still checks at the portal every few weeks.

“According to the books he read, dragons were once men, thousands of years ago. Men who passed through many magical portals; gathering greater and greater magical energies to themselves as they passed, heedless, from world to world – and time to time. Finally they forgot their own names and lost all human ways of thinking, and became fully magical beings. Winnow found most of this in the tale of a traveler to the future: he described a time when the lines between human and dragon would begin to dissolve again. Magical energy would be discharged, and then re-absorbed into all kinds of objects and artifacts. A golden age of sorcerous materials.”

Painting others seems to bring me back to myself.

Another self-portrait I can only wish I had the skill to paint would be of me on the phone, speaking with Joan, my face showing that I have unexpectedly seen into my own weakness and have discovered that I can’t stop myself from feeling and saying certain things.

I start our conversation by saying: “The chewing tobacco people have decided to go with a nationwide campaign. Magazines, billboards, sweepstakes. They’ve commissioned a minimum of six more paintings. Going to be a sweet payday.”

“Why do you keep calling me? What is this need to tell me this stuff?”

"I – I only call about once a week. Is that so strange?" And I always wait to make my calls at a time when I'm feeling in an up mood. Make sure never to contact her during my moments of desperation.

"Is this turning into some kind of stalker situation? You know our relationship is completely over."

"Okay, so there's no relationship left. But you're still the person who knows me best in the whole world. Who I can talk to, who I know best. I don't want to lose every bit of the connection we had. There was lots of good . . ."

I feel my longing now – can't stop my need – desperate just to get her to say one little word without that icy tone in her voice.

"Look, you don't know anything about what I'm going through. These calls are about you. Maybe someday, when we both have new lives, successful relationships, we might want to sit down and talk, laugh over old memories. But right now I think we should not have any contact. I'm going to hang up. Now."

This composition would have to capture that late night lighting, that feeling of being a small thing among the shadows of your own apartment. The subject would look defeated, sure, like his heart has just dropped through the floor. But maybe he has gained a certain kind of knowledge. There's something inside of him that has taken a turn, though he wouldn't be able to put it into words.

eight

FOR ME, THE EASIEST THING IS TO STAY LATE IN MY studio every night, work on my commissions, avoid my apartment till I'm too exhausted to do anything but collapse into bed.

It's late and I've just finished a tableau of buccaneers watching a beautiful woman walk the plank. I'm full of restless energy, not at all ready to go home. I pick up a flashlight and head down to the basement.

I stand a while and stare at the huge triangular crack here in the back of the old furnace room.

It takes one step to travel across to the other side. I feel pretty much unchanged, but there is the different taste to the air. I know I'm somewhere else.

I've come out, as ever, through a raw gouge in the massive stone rampart on this great, flat-roofed fortress.

This is my first night-time visit. There's no moon and far fewer stars than I would have expected. The starlight is sharp though – there's no light pollution here. It's quiet. I climb up onto the stout parapet and try to make out any lights in the city; I might even see the diffuse glow of a dragon exhaling. No. There's nothing. Not even the stirring of a breeze. I have to push away the idea that it's all empty, a deserted city. This is the way things should be with a city soundly asleep two or three hours before dawn.

So how would I paint this view? The sharp colors and busy layers of architecture are covered over in night's blankets of gray, but their presence would have to be indicated. I've half managed to distract myself, but I still wish I could hear a little noise, something to indicate the stirring of life.

I'm still for a minute or so. I do hear a slight rustling. I glance around, and then down, and discover that there's a lot of black shadows crawling up the side of the building. Whatever they are, it's their feet which rustle against the wall. They're moving steadily upward. I flick on my flashlight

and play the beam down along the wall. I see spiders.

Bristling with black hairs, heads bobbing, many legs in movement. Dozens of them – at least. It's a trick of perspective and deep night-time shadows, I'm sure, that makes it seem like they're growing larger as they rush up into my light. And the light seems to bend and bounce around them.

I switch off the flashlight, skid down over the rampart's edge and begin running toward my exit. I hear their feet strike the roof behind me. It seems like they're coming at me from several directions. A strand of webbing slaps across my left calf and sticks. I throw myself down and roll across a patch of roof. Maybe the rough surface will scrape the webbing free. No: it still sticks. I scramble on, desperate, panicked. A little hobbled – but I can move.

I glance up. There are spider threads shooting out over my head. They cross each other at various angles, laying out a net above me, attached to the ramparts. Another strand slaps against my hip and sticks. It pulls against me. I'm screwed.

But I'm here; I made it to my gateway. I throw all my weight into a lunge toward the gap in the stone's surface. The pressure from the spider's thread feels weaker now.

Instant transition: I'm back. Low ceiling, plenty of dust.

I roll away toward the far end of the room. Then I stand to face the crack, switching my flashlight back on.

The light catches on faceted eyes and the rapid rowing movement of lots of spider legs. They move forward, yet seem to shrink in size. It's as if they're animations made by a cartoonist with an inverted understanding of perspective. The beam from my light begins to bend, refracting at an ever sharper angle, till it turns all the way back and flashes into my eyes.

Abruptly, faster than a door closing, the crack is just a crack, exposed iron rods and packed earth.

There's a faint tugging, a movement against my pants leg. It's a tiny black spider, less than an inch long, hanging onto a very thick strand of webbing. I brush at it and shake it off. Following it with my flashlight beam, I see about ten more spiders scampering away. I chase after them for a minute, managing to crush a couple beneath my heel. It takes me a lot longer to peel away the thick webbing stuck to my clothes.

nine

I AM SITTING IN A CAFE WITH NO NAME. I LIKE THE light here. It's warm and clear. There's a high ceiling, a brightly painted concrete floor and rows of tall windows on two sides. To my illustrator's eye this is an expansive light, opening the space out toward the world and, at the same time, drawing the whole of the world inside. The place has a homemade charm and a relaxed vibe which emanates from the deep, well worn comfy chairs, the bookshelf loaded with funky old paperbacks, and the murmur of unhurried conversation.

It seems I've become a regular. Sitting by myself, reading and making sketches of people when they're not looking. Spooning up the soup of the day or shuffling over to the counter to refill my coffee.

I know the manager, Terry. That is, I've spoken with her a little. Enough to find out that I'm more than welcome to hang some of my paintings on the back wall. She's about thirty, tall, and has long blondish hair which spreads out in waves over her shoulders. Maybe I'm at the stage where I'll develop a distant, unrealistic infatuation. I'm considering whether Terry makes an appropriate object of unrequited fascination. She has complimented me on the artwork. She thinks that I'm



being ironic in titling my little show 'Visits to the Dragon City'.

The crack in the warehouse's foundation remains just a crack. I've checked a number of times. There is a bunch of spiders down there – small ones – and in one corner they've strung up a thick jungle of interlacing webs. It's curious the way spiders thrive in basements, since there doesn't seem to be many flies or other insects down there for them to feed on.

Mostly, I've painted pirates these past months. I have included figures such as the hungry-eyed beauty in the faded green dress and the wild-haired man in gray, brandishing a huge curved sword. There's plenty more out of my collection of sketches and memories to be worked into future pieces. Pirates keep me busy – I've got a reputation for them now. I've done a lot of scenes for a new chain of Caribbean resorts and lots of design work for a new video game called *Walk the Plank!*.

Since the closing of my basement gateway I take breaks from work by exploring my own home city. I take a pad and some watercolors and wander on foot or take a long bus ride. Sometimes I look for the empty places, the deserted shells of old industry; other times for signs of neighborhoods that feel especially real, with a life of their own, as yet untouched by the spreading cookie-cutter strips of Starbucks, Subway, Blockbusters and the like.

So far this cafe has been the end point, the best outcome, of all my wandering.

I get a kick out of seeing the sharpest of all my remaining images of that unreachable city together, up on the walls of a public space. Displayed this way they capture a larger view, a full journey into otherness. And it's fun to watch patrons of the cafe stop to take a second look, or push up close to examine a particular detail or dapple of color: caught up, without knowing it, in the city of my obsessions. This is a different aspect of the process of art than I'm used to experiencing. So far I can't get enough of it.

Three young women move slowly along the back wall, stopping to talk in front of each canvas. I'm listening, pretending to read the book review section from last week's paper.

One, with spiky, orange hair and skinny, bare arms covered with tattoos, says that she sees dragons. She gestures with her hands, arms rising with the gathering intensity in her voice. It's as if she's about to reach right into the painting in front of her.

"This one is peeking out of a doorway. Can you see it? It's waiting for someone – waiting for something – to happen? There's that story, you know. You guys ever hear it? A city full of dragons and all the humans are their slaves? It kind of sounds like a nursery rhyme. One of those grim ones. Stuff about *blood and tears, captive children's hopes and cries. Doorways closing, bristling skies opening* . . . Everything sucks for the humans. Then one woman hops through a portal into another world. She finds a way to open a permanent pathway. And then the magical energy flows both ways, like an open circuit. Before that the magic was static, like the buildings in a city, unable to make any real change happen. *Gates, portals, opening ways. Sky and ground and in-between.* Magic comes flooding through. Everything and everyone begins to transform. Now people – humans – have lots of power. The walls and ground open up. *Monsters in hand, minds at ease. Past, future, present, held in peace.* It's like a golden age. Happy ever after. For a while, anyway."

Her friends shrug, as if to say no they haven't heard that story. They stare at the painting, their brows furrowed.

Now Terry approaches these girls and speaks to them. The cafe manager looks a touch Pre-Raphaelite compared to this group. She's all flow and gentle curves in her crinkled, batik print dress. The younger women are etched with sharp lines and splashed here and there with postmodern ideas of color. It would be a hard juxtaposition to make work in a single picture.

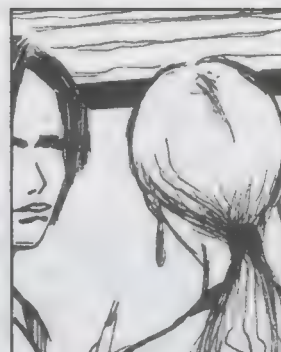
Terry says, "That's the artist right over there. He can probably tell you more stories of Dragon City."

The orange-haired girl turns and squints in my direction. I put my paper down and return her gaze. I can see the muscles in her bare arms tense and then relax again.

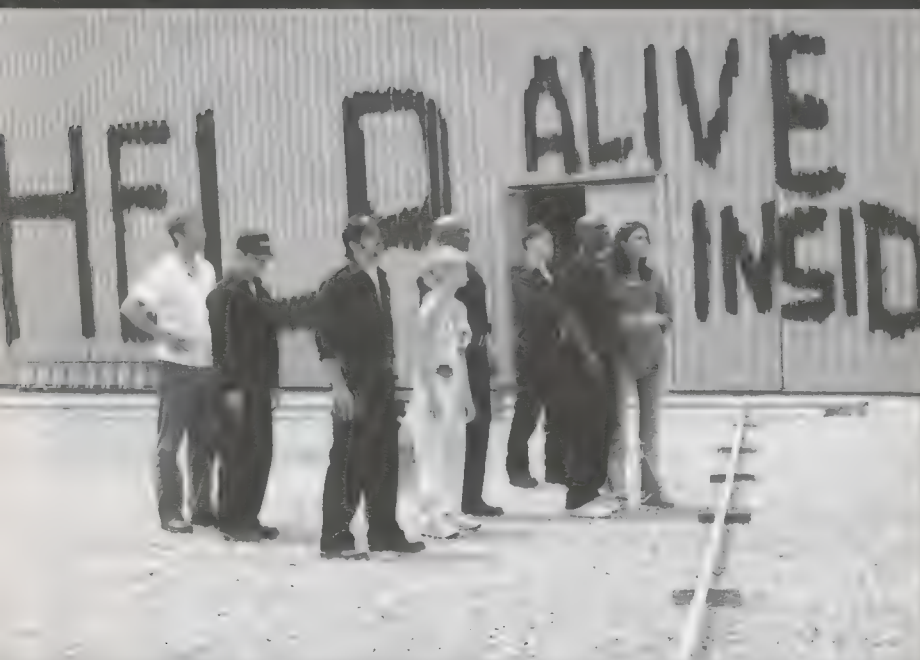
"Maybe he can," she says. Her lips part, form into a grin. "But I bet I know some stories that he hasn't heard yet."



pictures on a cafe wall
art by robert dunn



Electric Darkness



Dawn of the Dead has a great opening half-hour before taking a gore 'n' gunplay route the original was careful to temper with social comment

Christopher Fowler talks about *'The Passion of The Christ* purporting to reveal the truth and present it as a moral lesson into obedience places America in a context close to Islamic fundamentalism

in the back of Bennett's hearse, the warden points out that she has a son at home their age. 'Bring him along next time, we can have a foursome,' says Bennett, casually buttoning his shirt. Managing to squeeze the images of group sex, incest, blasphemy, bi- and homosexuality into one terse remark in the opening moment of a film must constitute some kind of unbeaten record, and neatly disproves the popular notion that Orton's dark laughter never made a transition to the big screen.

In the film version of Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, sex and death intertwine from the opening shot, as a clearly very game (and gamey) Beryl Reid sucks her phallic lolly in grisly close-up over a tombstone. Before the film's end, we'll have experienced everything from leather fetishism to seduction, blackmail, murder and troilism. In their way, such films are more shocking than any amount of body fluid-drinking on display in the *American Pie* films, because the latter are divorced from a political agenda. Of course, the Orton films are pitch-black anarchy for thinkers, and their outrageous religious blasphemy is an area that few modern mainstream US comedies (with the exception of the flat-footed *Dogma*) will dare stray into. Yet at the time, *Loot* was a perfectly acceptable crowd-pleaser featuring the mysteriously popular TV star Dick Emery in a back-up role.

There are only two Orton films. The third, *What The Butler Saw* exists as a surreal TV play starring Timothy West and Prunella Scales, involving a madhouse and Winston Churchill's severed penis. All are deliberate attempts to expose the absurdities of sexual, religious and political restriction. Without more flexible rules, suggests Orton, the world descends into the kind of degrading kitch imagined by Huysmans in 'A Rebours'. *Loot* is an astonishing ugly film; every emetic wall-colour clashes, every desire is selfish, every emotion is false. It's also very honest and funny.

Oh, and you'll probably never see it. That's because virtually all British films from this period are missing, unavailable on tape or

Whenever the world slips into turmoil we look back to other turbulent times, and lately, there's been a lot of interest in the cinema of the sixties, with a number of film critics specifically examining how the world unrest of 1968 – the riots in Paris and London, the end of the Prague 'Spring' – were reflected in popular culture. Linking political upheaval to cinema might sound trivialising, but when one considers how the intervening years of peace and stability have turned us into sentimentalists instead of thinkers, the subject becomes horribly pertinent. Now, I need you to jump with me on this one, because we're going to end up at Jesus, Dick Emery and *Dawn of the Dead*. Let me explain.

The revolutionary attitudes of the sixties hastened a change in cinema that was reflected in revisionist histories like Tony Martin's *The Cinema of the Eighties*, surreal post-apocalypses like *How I Won the War* and *The Last Days of Pompeii*, like *Alfie* and *The Knack* – and Joe Orton.

Anarchy without intellect is sensation. You can't subvert something unless you understand what you're subverting, and Orton knew very well what he was doing. The other night, in an effort to thin out my vast get-a-life film collection, I pushed in a rare tape of *Loot*, released in 1970, rewritten from Orton's play by Galton and Simpson. One of the first scenes in the film features a baby-faced Catholic undertaker Hywel Bennett and his boyfriend/partner in crime having sex with an overweight female traffic warden in order to cancel their parking ticket. As they're dressing



Dawn of the Dead

Christopher Fowler

It TAKING CINEMA LITERALLY: ports to act as a definitive text m the clergy. This desire to nail method of frightening followers an Christianity uncomfortably lism. By divorcing text from d emasculate it.'

DVD, never screened on TV, and completely misunderstood by those who hold the power to get them reissued – the self-styled critics of the Internet Movie Database, one of whom seems compares *Loot* with *Weekend at Bernie's*, for reasons known only to himself.

It's a small jump from Orton to the grotesquery of *The Passion of The Christ*. Orton's characters are made to suffer as a direct consequence of their religious obedience, but they would have suffered more by buying into Mel Gibson's 'This Is As It Was' opus. *The Passion* takes its source material literally, as though the event had been accurately recorded for posterity. This is also the approach taken by many 'occult' SF film and novels from America's bible-belt, which would have us believe that every parable and analogy used by the good book's contradictory narrators is hard fact.

The Passion purports to act as a definitive text by enlisting endorsements from the clergy. This desire to nail the truth and present it as a method of frightening followers into obedience places American Christianity uncomfortably close to Islamic fundamentalism. By divorcing text from context you both literalise and emasculate it.

And that, oddly, seems to be the idea behind remakes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Dawn of the Dead*. What now impresses about the former original film is what impressed then – its overwhelming sense of foreboding. (1974 was a great year for horror. It was the year of *Black Christmas*, *The Devil Within Her* [in gut-shaking Sensurround!], *Frighmare*, *Deranged*, *Maniacs of the Lunatic* and *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* – all of which were released onto huge UK screens.) From its visceral opening with exhumed corpses and talk of sunspots affecting behaviour, you know there is something very amiss in TCM's America. Less hokey than *Night of the Living Dead*, TCM feels steeped in a nightmarish Mansonesque evil that heralds the logical end of a frontier country that had lost its way on the path from wilderness to civilisation. The film's soundscape astonishes, its jumpy



TCM is America at a dead-end, doomed to stumble on in terror as order collapses from within. The remake was enjoyable in a blackly comic way, but had no such subtext and therefore no resonance

discordant visuals granting the film a documentary feel, and although the effect is diminished on the small screen much of the original dread survives. Although there is a climax, there is no closure – this is America at a dead-end, doomed to stumble on in terror as order collapses from within. The remake was enjoyable in a blackly comic way, but had no such subtext and therefore no resonance. This is equally true of the new *Dawn of the Dead*, which has a great opening half-hour before taking a gore 'n' gunplay route the original was careful to temper with social comment. Nothing wrong with that, I suppose – except that horror films are far more interesting when they mirror moral predicaments. Thinking-person's horror is out there – look at the astonishing resurgence in French and Spanish horror films like *The Children of Abraham*, *Malefique* and the wilfully controversial *High Tension* (the latter getting my award for best scare of the year). *High Tension*, in particular, manages to imitate and honour, melding 85 minutes of low-budget running and screaming with an outrageous idea. While it doesn't exactly offer insight, it does provide something we haven't been getting lately, a new twist on an old formula – and that will always be more welcome than a slavish adherence to reality.

Christopher Fowler's latest book is the story collection *Demonized* (Serpent's Tail, £10/\$15).

Sadly this is Chris's last Electric Darkness column as he'll be doing a lot of travelling this summer and will see fewer films. We hope that the column itself, however, will continue.



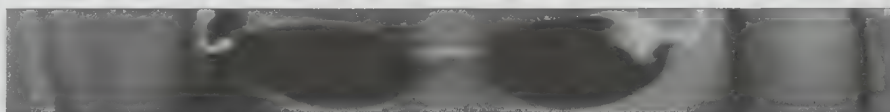
Texas Chainsaw Massacre

As many of you may know, I like to make regular additions to my already substantial CD collection. I've fallen into that pattern afflicting men of a certain age or generation in that a large number of my purchases are replacements or updates of stuff I've already got on vinyl. Modern collectors and *Mojo* readers are well served as these CD reissues often include band photos, liner notes by the likes of John Tobler or Johnny Rogan and hard to obtain singles, b-sides and demos. Purists such as my old mate John Keogh will tell you digitally encoded sound doesn't offer the quality aural experience of scratched, crackly black vinyl (and then become the first person I know to own an I-pod!). But to my mind and tinnitus-ridden right ear (having been shot at several years ago, but that's another story) human hearing has evolved only as far as varied quantification of four adjectives: loud, quiet, pleasant and unpleasant. And if the bulk of your listening occurs whilst tapping at a computer keyboard or riding the clank and rattle of the Central Line, the finer gradations of competing technologies are not readily apparent.

So what am I listening to? As a TTA alumnus, I am by nature against the modern tendency to attempt to tightly compartmentalise with a suffocatingly restrictive label. Yes, it's useful to know whether a book is broadly speculative fiction or gore horror or so-called 'chick-fic' but... resist the marketers and claim your own ever-expanding broad palette of personal likes and idiosyncrasies! The future the big corporations want is that portrayed in *Minority Report* where the adverts come to life and address the Tom Cruise character personally as he passes. All based on data collection and customer profiling from previous card purchases, enabling targeted campaigns and so forth. Ah but doomed to a degree of inefficiency as at some point the team leader will have made a range of choices which *doesn't*, and indeed *can't* describe me. Or you.

Elvis Presley is pretty big these days. Largely due to the Nike football advert with Eric Cantona imprisoning Thierry Henry et al in the hold of a ship where they're forced to play knockout. A slightly re-mixed Elvis calls for less conversation and more action. So, during one of my too many house moves during the past decade and a half, I had to leave some of my Presley vinyl behind and was keen to replace it. I'd also never heard The King's version of 'Little Sister', the b-side to 'His Latest Flame', and was keen to compare it with the familiar cover version by Ry Cooder. There it was, track 16 on the silver encased *Second to None* CD and the

THE DODO HAS LANDED BY ALLEN ASHLEY



NOT ALL PROGRESS IS GOOD PROGRESS ACCORDING TO THE DODO



ESPECIALLY NOT WHEN MRS DODO RECEIVES A TEXT MESSAGE FROM ORANGE SAYING THAT SOMEBODY REALLY FANCIES HER AND WANTS TO GET IN TOUCH

whole bundle only cost a tenner.

The sleeve held a mini-postcard insert in bright orange writing offering 'Free Pop Info!! Free Pop Stuff!!' if I filled it in and sent it off. Info? About whom? Will Young (no thanks, I'm more into Neil Young); David Sneddon (hasn't he retired?); pale Blink 182 copyists Busted (Busted? They should be!); Sarah Whatmore (who?); S Club/Britney/Atomic Kitten/Christina Aguilera (where's my dirty raincoat?); Kelly Clarkson (some relation of Jeremy's?); Alcazar (aren't we at war with them?); and Westlife (fuck off, I'm not that much of an old fart!). The point is that Elvis's contemporaries were Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Chuck Berry and then, later, The Beatles and The Stones. Those liberated by his hip-swinging teenage rebellion back in the mid-1950s are drawing pensions at the post office now. All the E-brained followers of Ian Van Dahl - another name on the postcard - or pre-teen Mis-Teeq wannabes who buy this CD on the strength of an advertising jingle are going to listen to something like 'Crying in the Chapel' and wonder, 'Where's the beat in that?' or piss their George At Asda cheap denims over the 'Kraut-Camp' of 'Wooden Heart'.

It's a pearl of hope, I suppose, that *their* attempts to steamroller, pigeonhole and nullify us may founder upon their ultimate lack of intelligence. In both senses of the word.

Not that they'll ever stop trying. Mrs Dodo received a text message from Orange saying that somebody really

fancied her and wanted to get in touch. (Allen replies in best Cockney impersonation, 'Oo is 'e? I'll far-kin' kill 'im!'). Now if this was really the case and they had Sarah's number, surely they'd just phone or text and introduce themselves? It was, of course, a promo for some dating chat line type scam. They got Mrs Dodo's details from a vote registered during *Big Brother*. My mother-in-law voted in *I'm A Celebrity*. She's a great-grandmother. I sincerely hope she's not going to be pestered by loose-thumbed seventeen-year-old estate ruffians wanting to exchange salacious messages in that illiterate mixture of grunts and single digit numbers that passes for texting vocabulary.

Before you ask, I wasn't offered the chance to chat with a bevy of honey-headed lovelies. Maybe I'm not quite the hunk I appear to be in the photo. I have won three holidays to Ibiza, though. Never took any of them. If I want to visit a vomitorium, I'll go to St Albans or Albert Square. Anyway, got to keep a few brain cells active for the column.

Talking of which, next issue's Dodo will be the 21st and in this year of TTA celebrations, I will commemorate the coming of age by extolling the virtues of something which is definitely better now than in the good old days. If I can think of anything...

Allen is currently editing *The Elastic Book of Numbers*, a short-story anthology which will be published by Elastic Press, and for which he is welcoming submissions. Full details can be found at www.elasticpress.com.





THERE IS A SENSING NUMBER: THE NEW ERAS BEING UP WILL BE HIGHLIGHTED JAPAN

JAPAN'S DARK LANTERNS

JOHN PAUL CATTON EXPLORES THE SHADOWS BENEATH THE RISING SUN

The scene is a state high school, somewhere in Japan, one sunny afternoon in late September. Lessons have been cancelled for the day. The students and teachers assemble on the ground floor of the drab, ferroconcrete Bauhaus-like structure, armed with balloons, papier mâché and brightly coloured cloth. They plan to transform the entire building, and leave it looking as gaudy as a chocolate box. Why? It's the *Bunka-sai* – the annual School Festival.

Every September or October, across Japan, the same thing is happening. Teachers stand back while students take over their classrooms, turning them into something that looks like a village charity fair, throwing open the doors to parents and nearby residents. The point here is essentially the same point driving the whole Japanese education system; the aim of getting all the students working together as teams, ultimately producing individuals who can blend in well in a group-orientated society. In the West, education is seen as a means of empowerment and self-improvement; in Japan, it is – along with the institutions of place and government – acknowledged to be a means to preserve social harmony, a concept known as the *Wa*. The annual Sports Day is another example: the students march in line to strident classical music, they are divided into color-coded teams and told to *gambaru* (try their hardest), there are formal ceremonies to open and close events – it brings back memories of the 1930s, but we are told that it's all for the aim of having fun.

From the 1980s to the present day, the West has admired the Japanese system and its achievements in increasing the literacy of the general population. But now certain events – mentioned in last issue's column – have drawn attention to the cracks in the monolith.

The system, by its nature of encouraging homogeneity, breeds a horrific degree of bullying. There is a saying in Japan: 'The nail that sticks up will be hammered down'. Any child who seems different because of looks, heritage, attitude, or ability, will suffer – mostly in silence. While this takes place all over the world, what is truly

offensive here is that the bullying can come from teachers as well. In Japan, although corporal punishment is technically illegal, there is a long tradition of *sensei* enforcing his authority with a few well-chosen slaps, and it's tacitly accepted. In December 2001, the Ministry of Education disciplined 149 teachers – a record number at the time – for what it termed 'obscene acts', which ranged from physical abuse to sexual harassment. In 2002, the number of teachers facing similar reprimands was 289. The total of teachers dismissed as a result was 3. The atrocities go on; in late 2003, a teacher in the city of Fukuoka was suspended for humiliating a student of Japanese-American ancestry, telling the boy he should kill himself because of his 'filthy blood'.

The best days of your life, eh?

Even if all teachers were angels, they would still be severely restricted by the materials they have to work with. All textbooks are either made or recommended by the Ministry of Education, and this is particularly contentious in the teaching of history. School textbooks are heavily censored regarded Japan's role in World War 2 and previous aggressive military incursions – perfectly in keeping with the Government's policy of refusing to formally apologise for its actions in the past, and selective amnesia regarding the extent of its own war crimes. This is why we have a nation of youths who can give heartfelt speeches on the subject of Hiroshima – but will shrug and give embarrassed smiles when Kanchanaburi or Unit 731 is mentioned.

Despite all this, what really sums up Japanese education is *Juken Jigoku* – Examination Hell. The University

Entrance examinations are mainly multiple choice, which require students to do little apart from memorise large amounts of detailed facts. Many parents will insist their children go to *Juku* – evening cram schools that provide tuition in subjects such as history, maths and English grammar – which adds more hours to an already long day. The pressure is on for the student to get through to a prestigious, 'brand' university; what they study when they get there is of little importance, the name of the University itself can secure a job after graduation.

Now, I've painted a pretty depressing picture, but there are signs of hope. The Ministry of Education have cut the compulsory hours for state schools, which means no more lessons on Saturdays. This has resulted, laughably enough, in parents' fears of a 'dumbing down' of national education – and anyway, private schools are free to work their students as hard as they can.

Also, acclaimed writers such as Patrick Smith and Alex Kerr may accuse the education system of creating a static culture, but schools do, in fact, celebrate diversity; Japan's not stupid enough to think that creating a nation of robots is in its own best interests. There are student committees whereby they are free to organise events and activities with no input from the teachers.

And above all, although films such as *Battle Royale* take the competitive nature of schools to logical extremes, although the media screeches hysterically over teenage suicides, truancy, and acts of random violence, the fact is that incidents of crime committed by adolescents have actually been decreasing for the last few years.

Why? What kind of generation is set to take the helm in a few years time? And why, despite all of this, do Japan's children inspire not love, not hope for tomorrow, but fear?

To be discussed in the next column.

Talk with JP about this column or his life in Japan at www.ttappress.com/discus

Daniel Kaysen's short fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons* and *Chizine*, amongst others. He lives in Brighton, England.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY EDWARD NOON



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DANIEL KAYSEN

THE OPPOSITION

"WHAT'S IT ALL about, Ray?" Al says sometimes, in contemplative moments when he's between orders.

"Beats me," says Ray, washing the knives.

"Yeah, beats me too. That's for sure."

They are not a pair prone to definitive theories.

They are not a pair for sudden changes, either. Al's diner – or Al's Diner Open Till Late as the sign reads – has been on the same spot for 25 years now, and Al and Ray were there at the start, doing then what they still do now. The food will keep you going, the coffee is strong, the things that need to be clean are spotless. The menu has changed a little but the heart of the place is just as it was 25 years ago. It's why it's so popular. It's why it's lasted.

Not like nearby.

The other shops in the road change hands once a season now, the neighbourhood perpetually stuck between sliding down into the low-life, and pulling itself up into classy.

And there, in the middle, stands the diner.

In all the 25 years that Al's has been open it has been a sanctuary, serving the needs of the neighbourhood. A warm place for the hookers, food for adulterous couples, post-club normality for those coming down from a night off the mainstreet. Doughnuts and coffee for the cops and the paramedics. Company for the taxi drivers when all the would-be customers have taken their own cars, or stayed home.

Al likes the mix, takes pride in it.

It is the only place in town where a cop will, politely, ask a hooker to pass the sugar and the hooker will comply without irony. Here all social bets are off. Here are just people, taking a break from business, regardless of race or colour or career.

"Bottom line," says Al, "is people need food. And drink."

"And company," says Ray.

"And company. Maybe *that's* what it's all about."

He leans on the counter, waiting for the next soul through the door.

AL WATCHES HER, when she arrives.

She's a first-time customer, smartly dressed like she's something in banking, maybe. She carries a briefcase, as if she's just come from staying late at work, and the coat she wears is too expensive for casual wear. Maybe she's an analyst, somewhere in the silicon district. Maybe she's in property. Hard to tell.

Pretty girl, very pretty. But obviously she's got man trouble.

Al knows that any girl that pretty who comes here this late, alone, has man trouble.

"What'll it be?" he says to her.

"What's good?" she says, taking him in.

Al knows how he looks, what impression he conveys. He looks down-to-earth, no frills, solid, reliable. Like an uncle you could turn to if you were in trouble. Like a guy you could trust with a job that needed care. He is balding and overweight, and his teeth could use a little work, but there is a foursquare solidity to him. He is not a man to bend in a gale, not Al.

And the weight suits him, he tells himself.

And besides, it's a good advertisement. "All I eat is my own cooking," he says, sometimes, to new customers.

"What's good is everything," says Al now, to the woman. "But if you were to ask me what's especially good, this evening I'd have to say the dark chocolate cake. That's especially good."

"Then I'll take that and a coffee," says the woman.



SHE SITS BY the window.

That's where the women, and men, sit, when they've got it bad and they've been stood up. They sit there wondering if their loved ones failed to appear by some cosmic stroke of bad luck, some chain of incredible coincidence which meant they could neither appear, nor phone, nor get word to the impatiently waiting. They sit there, on display, hoping that perhaps their unlucky lover might be wandering the streets and – lo – see them framed like an angel in the bright windows of Al's diner.

The painfully unloved choose different seating, out of sight of the window, embarrassed to be alone. Ashamed not to be chaperoned by a knight in shining armour or a woman in a little black dress, ashamed not to be one half of a couple freshly arrived here from making love, or partying up a storm, or just standing by the river mouthing I love you I love you I love you, over and over.

"Boss," says Ray, who's being watching the woman as well. "What?"

"I've got one of my feelings."

Al stops, looks at him.

They've been a team for 25 years and in all that time Ray's had one of his feelings exactly four times. The first feeling was about a thin-cheeked man. Turned out he was wanted a long way away for a couple of brutal and unsolved killings. Al phoned in Ray's hunch to one of his cop customers, and ever since then he and Ray have received a Christmas card from a grateful detective they never met, in a faraway city.

The second feeling was about a couple of teenage girls. Just temporary runaways, Al thought, who would get tired and cold by midnight and go back home. Ray shook his head. He couldn't really explain it, but he said they had the false confidence that a horrible end in the very near future can give you.

Al remembered how the last feeling had worked out, and phoned it in. But it turned out they were Family daughters, just out for the night. The Family weren't pleased by the attention. The police weren't pleased. Al wasn't pleased.

Ray didn't mention any more feelings for a long time.

The third feeling was about a single woman, lost looking. Ray said this time he was sure, and Al said if he was so sure he could phone it in himself. But Ray went back to the dishes and when the woman turned up dead the next day, murdered in an alley, Al and Ray couldn't meet each other's eyes.

And now here it was again.

"What kind of feeling, Ray?"

"Kind of a death feeling."

"Kind of?"

"More like definite."

Al takes the food and coffee over to the woman.

"You okay?" he said.

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Just part of the service."

"Oh. No, I'm fine thanks. Some rat stands me up then that's his loss, don't you think?"

She is very attractive and Al sees that she doesn't quite know it, which makes her even more so. Al is 50, she is maybe half that, the odds don't bear thinking about.

But Al is human, so to himself he notes her curves and her hair and her smile and her legs. And he says: "His loss, definitely," for she radiates life and hope, something magnetic and strong and good. No harm must come to this woman. He goes back behind the counter.

"You sure?" he says to Ray.

"More than sure. A few hours, max. I'll call this one in myself."

"Hold your horses," says Al. "You just hold those horses."

Al hopes his love life is like one of those trees that suddenly bears fruit again after a long barren spell. Nothing's happened since his marriage, so he must be due for something. But at 2 a.m. when even the single bed seems too big, like it did last year and the year before that, he wonders whether his love life isn't more like a tree that only blooms once. What if it never bears fruit again? It doesn't really bear thinking about.

Like all things that don't really bear thinking about he can't help thinking about it, at two o'clock in the morning. Even if he has just availed himself of one of the women who work the streets, he thinks about it. After all, it's his *love* life he is thinking about. He figures his sex life will continue while there's some twenties in the till and he has the ability to perform, and there's someone not too picky who'll call him sugar. But his love life?

Sometimes, not often, he feels he's falling a little in love with one of the women of the street. When that happens he takes care not to see her again. He takes cold showers. He re-does the wallpaper in the diner, out of hours, and the feeling of falling goes.

Never, ever, has he fallen in love with a customer.

It would be like a hooker falling in love with a john. Doesn't happen. Only in movies does it happen – Julia Roberts and Richard Gere. What was that one called?

"*Pretty Woman*," he says out loud now, not meaning to.

"Sure she is," says Ray. "Look, I'm calling it in."

"No, I'll get her home," says Al. "Police might not show, not after last time, and if they do show can we trust them? I'll take her home myself."

"What if she wants to go soon?"

"Then we close early."

"We close early?" Ray tries to get his head round the concept. The last time they closed early was for Al's wife's funeral, ten years ago. Since then they've been open every day except Christmas.

"Sure. If it's one of your feelings, Ray, then I gotta respect that."

He is nervous, watching her eat.

Double nervous.

First he's nervous like a teenager, knowing he's going to get an opportunity to ask the girl he's got a crush on if he can walk her home. That's a hell of a nervous thing.

Second he's nervous because of death.

Al hates death. Everyone hates death, but Al's been there at the graveside, saying goodbye forever to the loved one that death reached out and just *took*.

In fact, death took the last girl Al ever asked out. He asked her out, she said yes, they dated, they got married, they were solidly foursquare reliably happy, a little overweight but it suited them, and then a car mounted the curb one afternoon.

The sound of the impact caught death's attention. And that was it.

Al hates death and he hates the idea of Him watching this customer.

Well, Al will just to have to watch over her all the harder.

He knows he will jump every time tyres squeal or a taxi honks its horn, in case it's death, calling as per an earlier arrangement.

But what if it's not a car? What if it's a mugging instead? The town is full of dark corners and lazy-eyed men standing on them. The town is full of wired kids high on who knows what. Knives are popular accessories. Guns, even, these days. And death does a fine job of delegating, Al knows.

So maybe he should take Ray with him on the walk. Ray has strong hands and tattoos and nobody would mess with him.

But then there's the first set of nerves to think about. It feels like a date. You wouldn't take Ray out with you on a date.

So Al scratches that plan.

He watches her eat.

She doesn't know a thing, he thinks. It makes her all the more *good*.

At the end she waves for more coffee.

When he brings it she says: "Could you do me a big favour?"

"Sure."

"I'm taking a liberty, I know."

"That's what liberties are for."

He wants to kick himself, like he did in school, when he asked out his future wife. He always says something stupid when he's nervous. But she doesn't notice. She's too wrapped up in her own stuff.

"When I came to this part of town I thought it would be with my beau, but as he's deserted me –"

"– his loss," said Al, reminding her

"– which is his loss, as you say, but it's mine too because it means I've got to get home alone. Would you walk me, when you've closed up?"

"Sure," says Al, thrilled, and trying not to show it. The sweetest thing in all the world is when someone asks you, as a favour, for something you were about to clumsily offer them anyway.

"What time do you close?" she says.

"What time do you walk?"

"About one?" she says.

"Sure," he says. And he turns away and back to the counter, before either of them can change their mind.

Other singletons come and go. Other couples.

One couple – two men high on champagne and glorious beginnings – stumble through the door. They take one look at the lighting, at the decor, at the clientele and say in unison: "I don't think so," and stumble out again, laughing and happy at the congruence of their opinions, one more telling sign that fate is tipping them together.

"Good riddance," says Ray.

Two cops eye up Al's date. One murmurs something, the other looks at her legs and replies. Low cop laughter follows.

If other means fail you can tell the cops from the Family by the quality of the laughter. Cop laughter is low and dark. They have seen so many weary and unspeakable things that laughter is necessary, but it cannot help but be low and dark and outrage decency.

The Family, on the other hand, are the ones who have done the unspeakable things, but they are not haunted by them. Their laughter is lighter. Or would be. But laughter isn't always dignified, and they Family are dangerously fond of dignity and honour.

A taxi driver on the way back from the bathroom does a double take at Al's date.

Al feels like announcing to the crowd that she is *his*, at least for the half hour or so it will take to walk her home.

But he doesn't, he just watches the clock.

At 12.45 he turns the sign on the door to *CLOSED*. All the regulars check their watches and then turn to Al, puzzled, bereft.

"Early closing tonight," he says.

"You're kiddin' me," says one of the cops.

But Al doesn't kid. Everyone knows that.

At 1 a.m. he hustles the stragglers out, tells Ray he'll see him tomorrow, trying to hustle him out as well before he can offer to come along for safety in numbers.

Ray hesitates.

"Quit worrying," Al says.

Ray shrugs. "Can't help it," he says.

Ray takes one last look at the woman who returns his look with a level interested gaze, and then he goes. The door rattles behind him and is still.

"So," says Al, when it's just the two of them. "Where's home?"

She tells him.

It's as he hoped, half an hour away. He had had a nasty thought, what if it was just two streets down? They'd only be together for a few minutes at best.

You can't say anything in just a few minutes at best.

But no, he's in luck. It's a half hour walk. And the walk is well lit and the areas they have to pass to get to her place are okay. Her neighbourhood is a weird mix, one of those strange areas that cities throw up, the very rich just next to the very low. But there's no need to guess which particular part *she* lives in.

He puts on his coat. Checks the back door is locked. Turns off the lights. Starts wondering what on earth he is going to say to her on the way.

But he needn't have worried.

She is an interesting person to walk with. She knows the history of the streets they are walking down, and not just the civic history. She knows the darker details that time sometimes forgets. She knows the places of old attacks and slayings. And she's up to date, too, on the more recent ones.

"You don't look like the kind of woman who would know these things," he ventures.

She shrugs. "Quick learner, I guess."

"From who?"

"From my beau," she says. "He's . . . not quite on the straight on the narrow, if you know what I mean."

Al, who has spent his whole life exactly on the straight and narrow, tells her: yeah, he knows.

He knows Ray, after all.

Ray had just come out of jail when he applied for the job at the diner that Al and his wife were opening. Al left the hiring decisions to his wife, and his wife saw that Ray was, underneath, a good soul, a loyal soul, and she said they should take him on, no matter what he'd done before.

They did take him on. And now nobody would ever know about his past.

"In fact," says the woman, "that's why I fancied company tonight. My beau usually shows. He hasn't. I wondered if perhaps a, how shall I say, jealous competitor had made a move. You know what I'm saying."

Al tries not to sound alarmed as he allows that he does know what she is saying.

"It's why I won't get a taxi," she says. "Taxis are owned by, you know, *interests*."

Ten minutes left of the walk. Unconsciously Al quickens his pace.

"Does that kind of talk make you uncomfortable?" she asks.

"No," he says too quickly. He hears himself. He sounds like a school kid, faking it, trying to sound grown up. So he tells himself to stop pretending. "I mean, yes, maybe it makes me uncomfortable. I don't like to think of you in danger. You're an attractive, you know, a –"

Why is he *saying* this, he thinks.

"People have mentioned that," she says, smoothly. "I can't see it myself."

Al stops himself from saying anything more.

They chat about more trivial things. Building projects, weather, stuff, until they reach the upscale part of her neighbourhood.

"You must be round here, I guess," he says to her.

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"No, I'm downaways."



"Oh?" And then to hide his embarrassment at the blunder he starts talking too fast about his own neighbourhood. It had seen better times, but he couldn't afford to move.

"I could afford to move," she says, "but somehow we – my beau and I – we like the area we're in."

Al sees that they are now leaving the upscale places behind. Suddenly only intermittent streetlights are working. Suddenly there are eyes on corners.

"You're wondering why I live here?"

"No. I know that places can change really fast. Like the street where the diner is. Sometimes it teeters on becoming like this, and if it fell, it would fall in a day. But something always pulls it back."

"Mmm," she says, stopping. "Anyway, I'm down here." A set of steps lead down from the street. "You want to come in?"

She undoes her coat, in anticipation of homecoming.

He looks at her curves. His heart beats a little faster and he says: "Yes." High-pitched and too quick. Like a goddamn teenager, he knows. "But if your, uh, beau returns?"

"He won't mind," she says. And she gets her keys out and goes down the steps.

Al follows her down, suddenly not at all sure what is on the menu.

"Nice place," says Al, though it's not: it's too dark, for a start, and there's a feeling to it, a coldness.

"Really?"

Al looks round for something to compliment. "Yeah," he says, failing to find anything specific he could praise.

"Most people hate it," she says. "But it suits us just fine."

"You and your beau?"

"Me and my beau. Drink?"

"Thank you. You have whisky?"

"I think we can run to that."

She takes off her coat. Al tries not to look like he is looking at her, but he can't help it. Her figure is . . . well, sensational. And a sensational figure is even harder to ignore when it's only a few feet away and offering you a drink.

And then she smiles.

When a girl with a sensational figure offers you a drink *and* smiles at you, it could truly make a grown man cry, Al thinks.

He clears his throat. Holds his hands together to try to stop them from shaking. Tries to fix a sociable look on his face.



"You okay?" she says.

"Uh-huh," trying to sound upbeat.

"I'm sorry if I'm being forward, but I'm guessing you're wondering what's on the menu, as it were. Is that correct?"

"Uh-huh," says Al, who doesn't have any words left.

"Don't worry," she says. "If you're wondering what's good, everything is. But if you're wondering what's especially good this evening, then I'd have to say . . ."

She smiles.

"What?" says Al.

And then come the three slow knocks on the door.

RAY OPENED THE door to his apartment.

She was short, pretty underneath but no-nonsense looking. Ray knew the type.

"Mr Tallarico?"

"Yes?"

"We've got some questions about the disappearance of your employer, Alan Earle." She waved her badge.

"Come in, it ain't much," he said, apologising for the room. "Get you a drink?"

"Coffee, thanks," said the cop. She stood in the kitchen and watched him make it. When it was done they sat at the battered table. "You don't seem surprised," she said.

"I'm not," said Ray. "You'll have checked me out. I have these feelings, sometimes. Some are right, some are wrong."

"And last night you phoned another in, about a woman in danger."

"Yup."

"Brave, phoning in hunches."

"Stupid, more like. But they're real strong. Had to do something. Am I a suspect?"

"Not to me you're not."

"Figure I will be to someone."

"Everyone's a suspect to someone. Tell me about the woman."

Her name was Rosanna. Rosanna Alice Lee. Pretty name, everyone said, but too pretty for a cop. So when she joined the force, when she became no-nonsense, she twisted it a bit and became plain Alison Lee.

After interviewing Ray she went back to the station, made some calls, stared out of the window, waited for someone to call back. Waited for a witness to come forward. Waited for

the cops going door to door on the streets to report that someone remembered an odd couple, walking home too late, a very odd couple. She didn't look like she was rental. He didn't look like he was a sugar daddy. Someone had to remember them. The young and beautiful tend not to hook up with the old and chipped round the edges.

But then again maybe they were unremarkable after all. Maybe he looked like the father, beginning to go to seed after years of working and saving for her college education. And she looked like the daughter who used her education to soar into success. Maybe that was it.

Alison Lee waited for the call, from anyone, from anywhere. But that day there was nothing. Nothing at all.

One week later the call came. One of those hard to judge calls, a caller without a name wanting to meet somewhere dark and anonymous – a garage, this time. Perhaps a con with a grudge, released now, wanting revenge; or an informant wanting to spill, but scared out of his wits.

Of course, the procedure was perfectly clear. Such calls should be reported and logged. The meeting should be kept, but with back-up. Surveillance, body armour, the works.

But the voice had promised information on the disappearance of Alan Earle, and no one else was offering anything at all, despite the questions on the street, despite the promise of money and sympathetic judges at trials. And back-up and surveillance is expensive. And paperwork's a pain. And life, basically, is too short sometimes. So she took lunch early, and went.

He was Family. She saw that at once. When the Family dress down they still dress too high. Everything he wore was too clean, too new.

"It's a turf war," he said. "Al got caught up in it."

"A turf war between who?"

"Family on one side, someone else on the other."

"What do you mean, *someone else*?"

"The Family don't know."

"You're in a turf war with someone and you don't know who they are?"

"Excuse me, did I say *we*?"

"Sorry," she said. It was a blunder, a bad one, but she watched him and he didn't move, didn't look offended. The ones that keep the cool the best are the most dangerous, she knew. But also the most useful. "Is it a race thing?"

"No. More a spiritual thing."

"*Spiritual*? You're going to have to give me something more than that."

"There is nothing more than that."

"Why Mr Earle?"

"Because he holds the balance. Held the balance."

"The balance? What balance?"

"I should go."

And he did. Alison Lee watched him walk away.

"MORE COFFEE?"

"Thanks." She sat where she was while Ray went to make it. The apartment hadn't improved any since she'd last come, but then again it hadn't gotten worse, either. The room had achieved a stasis, of sorts.

"What?" said Ray, seeing her look when he came back with coffee, but not able to read it.

"You going to take over the diner?"

They had found Al's body. There was a will. The diner was Ray's, if he wanted it.

"Probably not," he said. "I'm no good at that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"People."

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm not like Al was. Al made you think that everything would be all right while he was around. If you had a little bit of trouble, he could get things straightened out. I'm not like that."

She looked at him. A ghost of a prison tattoo crept out from under the sleeves of his shirt. "You know what you look like?" she said. "You look like a good man to have around if there was *big* bit of trouble."

"Why do you say that?"

"Cause I'm in a big bit of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Ray said, quietly, like he could fix it.

See? Alison nearly said. *See, that's exactly what I mean.* But she didn't. "Will you take over the diner?" she said, instead.

"Would it help you if I did?"

"A lot."

"Okay," he said. "But I haven't got Al's . . . his way with people. He could keep them all happy, all the really awkward ones: Family, cops . . . uh, no offence."

Alison smiled. "None taken. I'll make sure we behave."

Al's Diner Open Till Late reopened one week later.

Rosanna Alice Lee, as her father had named her, met again with the man in the garage. They had a long discussion about the *balance* of the city, which rested on one particular neighbourhood. They agreed that the neighbourhood in question needed a place where cops and paramedics could get doughnuts, where Family members could get coffee, where hookers could get warm, where the lovelorn could wait in peace and light for lovers who would not come, where the lonely could hide and read yesterday's newspaper.

They also agreed that Ray didn't have Al's natural gift for facilitating such easy mixing, so they'd have to do some of the work themselves. She, Rosanna, would look after the cops, and her cousin was a paramedic so he'd look after the ambulances. In turn he, the garage man, the man with no name but very new shoes, said that he would try to persuade the Family and their friends and business acquaintances, to behave.

They would all watch Ray's back.

And once in a while the two of them would meet in the garage, just to catch up, just to share notes.

There were hitches at first but everyone was unusually patient when the service was a little slower than before, when items went off the menu, when the new girl Ray had hired took a couple of days to figure out the till. There were hitches, but when viewed soberly the change-over was miraculously smooth. 25 years Al had run the place, and in the space of 30 days Ray had showed he could do it himself.

And then, one night, a handsome well-dressed man walked in, came up to the counter, looked Ray in the eye.

"WHAT'LL IT BE?" Ray says to him, because the girl has stalled. She is no good with tall handsome men, not yet. She is only young, doesn't understand about the fencing of it, the cut and parry and thrust. Ray, on the other hand, knows all about the fencing of it, the cuts and parries. Ray knows all about that.

"What's good?" the man says. And meaning upon meanings are layered in the way he says it.

A paramedic, Rosanna Alice Lee's cousin in fact, stops midway through his sugar rush, watches the exchange. Has a feeling. Makes a call. A family call.

Alison watches the diner from a car outside. The man is tall, dark, model-looks handsome, one of those mythical men that rarely see the light of reality, but this one does and he sits in the bright lights at the window. He touches Ray's arm when he brings him over coffee. It is not a good sign.

She goes into the diner. "Hi Ray," she says.

"Hi," he says, a little more up than normal, a little smoother. Like a gambler who knows he's on a perfect roll. "What can

I get you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm in the area all night, coming and going. Just thought I'd check in."

Her garage contact is in the corner, she notices. He's been called too. Someone else has made a family call.

They do not make eye contact.

Alison goes out again, watches from the unmarked car.

He leaves the diner, after a while, the mythically handsome man. Just before he goes Ray tells him something, quietly. To others it looks like a quiet warning, a request from the management to vacate the premises and not make a fuss.

That's what the cops figure Ray was doing, when he said something quiet to the guy. That's what the Family figure, too. Just a quiet word, which had the desired effect.

Nothing further out of the ordinary happens till closing time.

Alison watches as one by one the customers leave, and then she watches as Ray walks in the direction of home. She drives off then and parks, discreetly, opposite Ray's place, watches him walk down the road and enter the building, alone.

Shortly after that the man appears, from the shadows near Ray's building. Alison hadn't seen him waiting there. He presses a buzzer and is admitted before she can work out what to do.

She gets out of the car, watching the door to the building swinging slowly shut. Perhaps if she gets there in time she can catch the door before it closes, slip upstairs and –

But out of the shadows comes a second figure. A figure that catches the door before it shuts. A blonde figure, expensively dressed. A figure that slips inside. And pulls the door closed behind her.

"SO," SAYS RAY. "What's on the menu?"

The stranger smiles as he undoes his coat.

This stranger is one of those rare tricks he could easily fall in love with, Ray thinks. He always liked the idea of perfection, and this man has it. Ethereal, dark, taller, stronger. Ray is looking forward to a night of long, ethereal, darkness. It is almost unbearable. He radiates something. Like a promise. Like a dream. Like *hope*. Like something good, finally. Like a –

Then, suddenly, like a wave breaching the high tide line, Ray gets one of his feelings, which quickly heightens into certainty. His eyes widen in surprise: someone is standing outside the door, in the hallway. And she is the opposite of hope, of goodness, of love. And then come the three slow knocks.

NO ONE HAS yet cracked the art of telling sceptical police chiefs about the stories of the city, not stories like this one.

Alison tries, though. She has to do something. She fails. She takes retirement, on mental health grounds. Her badge, her existence, her future, are all taken from her. She watches daytime TV and wonders how long can she last. And then she gets a strange letter from her lawyer telling her that one Raymond Tallarico, deceased, has left her a diner, of all things, in his will. Does she have any instructions?

The man from the garage calls. They meet. He tells her that he has friends he cannot name who would be delighted to support her if she decides to take on the diner.

"I'm going to try," she says. Someone has to do the job. Someone must hold the line. "Do you think the man and the woman will come back?"

"Yes. Can you be compromised?" he asks.

She has considered this. Her sex life can look after itself, fine. Her love life has been quiet a long time, but she finds with each extra birthday she misses it less. Her love life isn't a concern. "No, I can't be compromised."

"Good," he says, and smiles. She listens to his footsteps echo round the concrete, as he walks away.

THE NEXT TIME they meet they can talk, exchange pleasantries, for she is now the owner of Rosanna's Diner Open Till Late and he is a valued customer.

It is like the relief of the adulterous – at last, to be able to talk in public, to be seen in the same room. Of course, they are not in a relationship. They have never even flirted. If it has occurred to her, or him, that there is something more than a commonly held interest between them then they certainly do not show it. There is no cut and thrust, no parrying, no exchange that carries meaning upon meaning. She is simply the owner of the diner. He is simply a valued customer. There is nothing remarkable in that. He has no special feelings for her. She has no special feelings for him. *All* her customers are valued. That's what she tells herself, late at night. All her customers are valued. That, after all, is the secret of this place.

In the back corner a cop asks a hooker to pass the sugar. She does. "Thank you," he says. She goes back to her paperback, he goes back to his racing results. It's that kind of place: a place of racing results and dogeared romances, a place of crosswords and three minute love songs on the tinny radio. Simple food that will fill you up, and strong coffee to wash it down.

Those that sit by the window get to see the world go by in all its various glory: couples and drunks, bums and clubbers, sharks and good Samaritans. Property developers too, sometimes, gauging prices and costs, assessing the area, doing the sums, making plans that will most likely come to nothing, but a little fishing never went amiss.

And occasionally a mythically handsome man and a magnetically attractive woman pass by, glance in, wondering if there is an opportunity yet. But they see none. It does not matter. They will return in a later season, when the trees have turned, when the nights have lengthened, when the love-lorn feel the truth of darkness closing in and long for something, anything, of the light. There is nothing like the passing of time to deepen the darkness. And that darkness is where they are at most home, this mythically handsome man and magnetically attractive woman. That is where they head when they've walked by and past, the diner, the sites of old murders, the upscale neighbourhood adjoining theirs.

On their way home the couple take in the scenery, smile at other couples, remind each other of old times. "Do you remember this place? Who was it we met here? When was it again?" One of them will remember.

They walk hand in hand. People smile at them. They talk of little things. They bet each other pennies who will be the one to make an impression on Rosanna Alice Lee. For one of them surely will. Unless . . .

Unless Rosanna Alice Lee and the man, the Family man . . .

"However much we want it it's still unlikely," says the woman.

"Possible, though," says her beau.

"Yes, but –"

He puts his finger on her lips. "We'll wait and see."

She bites his finger. He laughs. They walk on.

"But really, it doesn't seem likely."

"No. It doesn't. But it's how we started. It's how we were when we first met."

They were from opposite sides of the tracks, too.

And opposites, well, they do attract, sometimes. And such matches can last, as long as there's some reciprocity, some flexibility, some willingness to reach out across the distance between them to keep love fresh, after the honeymoon.

The secret is to meet in the middle, to become something new, halfway between the two. That's the secret of their longevity, this pair of lovers still in love.

At the top of the steps they kiss, long and slow. Then hand in hand they make their way down the steps into the blackness.

I WAS IN THE POLICE FORCE FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS.

Started as a constable, finished as a detective sergeant. If you asked me why I quit, I couldn't tell you. There isn't a why. There's just what happened. But everything falls apart, so perhaps it doesn't need much explanation.

Do you remember the spring of 2003? Nobody knew why we'd gone to war in Iraq. We were dropping bombs on a capital city for reasons everyone knew were false. I suppose the weapons of mass destruction were like angels: you knew they were a myth, but somehow it would bring bad luck to say so. There was a sense of things having their own momentum: the war had to happen because it was happening. It was the end of something we didn't even have a name for.

JOEL LANE

IN MARCH OF that year, some builders collecting a pile of scaffolding found a dead man underneath it. His blood was all over the back wall of the warehouse, a former church in Digbeth. I got drafted into the investigation team because they were short-handed. Most of the South Birmingham police were too busy raiding mosques and arresting mouthy teenagers as terrorist suspects to bother with a murder.

The dead man was thirty-five, divorced, lived alone. He'd been a cook in one of the Digbeth cafeterias. The cause of death was a number of vicious stab wounds in his back, made with something like an ice-pick or a loose railing spike. We doubted this had been the punishment for a dodgy bacon sandwich. His clothes were in a neat pile a few feet away. There was no blood on them.

The absence of a murder weapon was matched by the absence of any reason for him to be there. I thought it was a gangland execution: he'd been marched into the warehouse and forced to strip before being pushed to the wall and murdered. But none of our local informers had heard anything about it. The dead man had no form. Traces of Ecstasy in his bloodstream might mean he was linked to drug dealers, but only his age group made that remotely unusual.

There were two bits of evidence that looked more promising. The first was a scrap of paper in his wallet with the names of some local escort agencies and massage parlours. The second was a note in the pathology report that minor injuries on the body – cuts, lash marks and burns – had been inflicted weeks or months before his death.

AROUND THAT TIME – just before or just after the body was discovered in the warehouse – my wife left me. Things had been difficult between us for years, but I'd hoped that when our daughter left home we'd be able to reach a balance. However, no sooner had Julia moved into her boyfriend's flat than Elaine decided our house was no longer a family home. I was more confused than bitter, virtually a spectator to the end of my marriage. If there'd been a crisis, a terrible row, a betrayal, I could have found a way to heal the rift. But how Elaine and I behaved didn't seem to matter. The process had a momentum of its own.

By the time we'd divided up the house contents and I was trying to convert the living-room into a bedsit for purposes of mental regression, it was already summer. Climate change had become an inescapable fact, and the city felt like a vast iron box with the sun trapped inside it. There had been two

more deaths by stabbing, all of them solitary men found in desolate industrial buildings. I was working long shifts, and drinking at home to try and get my emotions over with as fast as possible.

A young couple had moved into the house next door. I got into the habit of listening for them late at night, if I was at home. When they made love I'd press my whole body to the wall, arms outstretched as if trying to embrace the vision. I thought of her orgasms as rare moths I was trying to catch. It took me weeks of eavesdropping to realise that she wasn't getting there, only faking to excite her partner or herself. Once I began to listen for it, I was saddened by her frustration. The magic seemed to be beyond everyone's reach.

The second dead man had been found in a disused factory in the Jewellery Quarter. He'd been stabbed twice in the lower back, once on each side of the spine. The pathologist said it might have been a botched attempt to remove his kidneys. He didn't have a donor card, but he was carrying a membership card for a 'gentleman's club' half a mile away. It was near the Hockley Flyover, in Great Hampton Street. I bet the owner was chuckling for weeks after he made that purchase.

My visit to the parlour was as low-key as possible. I waited until the Madam was alone, then showed her my ID. She called one of the scantily-clad girls to take over the door, and led me into a tiny office with a wall safe and a phone. "We've never had any trouble here," she said. Her face was blank, but her hands were trembling.

"I'm not looking for trouble," I said. "Just some information." I showed her a photo of the dead man. "Do you recognise this guy?" The report of his death hadn't yet appeared in the papers.

She nodded slowly. "Seen him here a few times. Don't know his name."

"Can I talk to someone who . . ."

"Went with him?" She opened a ledger and flicked through the last few pages. They were covered in tiny, neat handwriting. "Oh." She closed the book. Looking away from me, she said quietly: "He saw Maxi. A few times. She's only here by appointment. Bit of a specialist." She gave me Maxi's mobile number.

As I got up to leave, she said: "Come back if there's any . . . other way we can help you." I didn't respond to her smile. As I left, one of the girls was showing a punter out. Her costume was revealing at the front; at the back, it was nothing but a couple of strings. My face flushed as she opened the

FACING THE WALL

door for me. The other man walked off hastily. It was getting dark; the office buildings across the street reflected the lamp-light from their dusty upper windows. Old-fashioned stone carvings made the roofs appear to be carrying vines, exotic birds and black roses.

I WASN'T ASKED to interview Maxi the 'specialist'. Which, given my state of mind, was perhaps a good thing. I caught a glimpse of her walking into the station: a tall woman in a dark blue trouser-suit. My boss, DI Hargrave, talked with her for a couple of hours. Later, she told me Maxi was a dominatrix.

"Williams paid her to tie him up and beat seven shades out of him. There's a basement room under that parlour with no windows. A punishment room. But she refused to go on seeing him. You know why?"

"He asked her to kill him." The thought hadn't occurred to me before that point; but as soon as I said it, I knew it was true.

"You know what this means? He could have been complicit in his own killing. And so could Morris. Serial manslaughter. Or gimpslaughter." Hargrave glanced down at the interview notes, without focusing. "Maxi says she gave Williams a phone number she'd picked up off the Internet. Some organisation called Maze. Sort of a contact group for masochists. I've tried the number. Disconnected."

"Maybe they kind of . . . died out."

"I don't think so," Hargrave said. "To kill like that takes something unusual. Whoever did that won't let someone else top him. Not without a fight."

"Reminds me of that case in Manchester. The young guy who was killing senile pensioners. Said it was wrong to keep them alive."

Hargrave shook her head. "He was just a pathetic madman. This guy's something else. He's a real monster. He'll go on until he's stopped."

When I got home, near midnight, I couldn't sleep. I poured myself a large whisky and sat at the computer. The words 'masochism', 'pain' and 'punishment' all brought strings of interesting sites, but nothing I could connect with the two deaths. 'Maze' got me nowhere. I began to trawl sites of wounds and murder victims while getting more and more drunk, convinced that the answer was hidden somewhere in the computer. Or somewhere in my own head.

I began to think about the time, a dozen years before, when

Elaine and I had gone into the maze at Longleat. I'd been convinced I could work it out, but we'd never even found our way into the inner section. At the third or fourth sighting of the same landmark, Elaine had wanted to give up. But I'd insisted on searching further, until it was getting dark and we had no choice but to leave.

The backstreets of Digbeth and Hockley were mazes. Old industrial districts, part redeveloped and part derelict, with no consistent street plan or identifiable centre. They were the key financial districts of the black economy. Stolen cars were driven there and were in fragments before the dawn. Every business seemed to be a front for something else. And there was no point appealing to Neighbourhood Watch groups for information. Hardly anyone lived there – at least, hardly anyone who had a home.

THREE OF US spent a few weeks doing the rounds of saunas and massage parlours in the West Midlands. We were looking for anyone who recognised Morris or Williams, or had heard of Maze or any similar organisation. After a while, my memories of these places began to blur into a generic impression, like the franchises of a retail chain. The reason the police tolerate massage parlours is that they minimise the visibility and disruptive effect of prostitution, not that they minimise the exploitation or the danger. There's a difference.

One girl asked me if either of the dead men had had a tattoo. "I heard something about Maze," she said. "The members all have a small tattoo on their backs, just above the belt. It's made with blue ink. The ink they used to use in fountain pens." No such tattoo had been found in either case; but then, the skin area in question had been gouged out from both men.

Needless to say, I didn't avail myself of the facilities at any of these places of recreation. Even though I could have done with a jacuzzi at the end of another hot day out on the streets. And I could have done with some other things too. Elaine leaving had changed what I was capable of.

After a month of struggling with my sense of what was appropriate behaviour for a police officer, I drove up to Stafford and visited a parlour there. Without my ID. I expected a brutal experience, but was surprised at how kind and friendly the girl was. Driving home, I began to realise that affection was not what I had wanted. The facts of reality called for something more violent. I was mixing work and pleasure even then, though I didn't know it.

HARGRAVE WAS RIGHT. At the end of July, a third man was found in a car repair garage in Witton. He'd been pretty much torn apart, painting a collection of machine tools with blood. Once again, the murder weapon was apparently missing. A search of his house revealed a new factor: the bloke was gay. Not that it made much difference. A new set of contacts, websites, venues; but the same kind of death and almost certainly the same killer.

Looking for a tattoo seemed ridiculous when you'd seen the crime scene photos: bits of him were scattered over several yards, and his lower body had to be reconstructed with the help of computer modelling. However, now the guys in the path lab knew what to look for, traces of a small design began to appear. The ink was blue-black, and scar tissue under the skin helped to define the shape of the tattoo. After a few days, they had an image they were at least 50% sure of. It was a bull's head.

THE THIRD CASE brought me an answer. I found it in my own time. At Boots, a barely lit male pick-up joint on the edge of the city centre, I met a man in a leather vest whose ex-lover had belonged to Maze. He told me a story in his bedroom. It was a story I'd heard before, or rather read as a child. Afterwards, I let him do what he wanted. It didn't matter.

Nothing mattered except finding the killer. And I did find him. It took five months. Along the way I picked up a few scars and bruises, a broken rib, and a small tattoo at the base of my spine. I played games devised by lonely men in their basements and garages, and learned to feel my way through the maze of their inarticulate need. Of course, I had to leave the police force. I couldn't afford for rumours to get out – either at work or in my new life. Some of my old friends seemed to decide I'd changed too much. But I never lost sight of my goal.

On a dark morning in midwinter, I found him. He'd killed at least five more people by then. Meeting him wasn't something that happened by chance. You needed contacts, rituals, payments. He moved from place to place, but was always at the heart of whatever you were trying to get into. At that time, his home was an industrial estate in Nechells. A labyrinth of new factories that had never been used and old terraces that should have been empty but weren't. I found him by letting him come to me.

When I first saw him, my impulse was to turn and press myself against the wall. We were standing in a disused office

where squatters had left heaps of charcoal and filthy blankets. The plaster had fallen from the back wall, exposing neat brickwork. The moonlight through the barred window showed me his silhouette. He didn't speak as he walked towards me. I realised he was mute. My fingers trembled as I unbuttoned my shirt.

His raw breath in my face was semen and blood. He looked at me. I couldn't see his eyes. Then he stepped back and waited. I turned to the wall and dropped to a half-crouch, one leg bent. My right hand was unzipping my boot as he charged. I turned back with the knife in my hand. He was strong, but I was faster.

The moon was down and the building was pitch-dark when I found my way back out, carrying the trophy of my fight. Leaving another unsolved murder, and a body they had no chance of identifying. As I climbed over the gate to the alley that led to a junkyard that led to a narrow street, I muttered a prayer for all the defeated souls who'd given themselves to him. All the shut-down strangers. The men who'd travelled so far into ruin they couldn't wait for death to catch up.

I had to keep moving after that, on the run from his followers. I drove to Wales and drifted from one small town to another, then caught a train to the south coast of England. It's February now, and the estuary where I'm staying is choked with blackish lumps of ice. In the spring, who knows? I might catch a ferry and head east across the continent, maybe ending up in Greece. Or even Crete.

Every night, I kneel in the dark and open the wooden box I've carried with me from Birmingham. It's the only possession I've kept, apart from a little suitcase of clothes and a few maps. I lift up the thing in the box and . . . worship it, I suppose. It's easier to worship what's dead. I've used bleach and formaldehyde to reduce the smell. I don't want trouble with the police or hotel authorities. And of course, without the body, it's nothing much. Just a slightly decayed bull's head.

If you're wondering who I am, there's your answer. I know who I am. I'm the man who killed a god.

Joel Lane is the author of two novels, *From Blue To Black* and *The Blue Mask* (Serpent's Tail); a collection of short stories, *The Earth Wire* (Egerton Press); and a collection of poems, *The Edge of the Screen* (Arc). He is currently working on his third novel, *Midnight Blue*. He has also edited an anthology of subterranean horror stories, *Beneath the Ground* (The Alchemy Press); and he and Steve Bishop have edited an anthology of crime and suspense stories, *Birmingham Noir* (Tindal Street Press).



STRIPPED BARE

Towards the end of the eighties, when I was coming of age and should traditionally have been putting aside such adolescent activities as constant masturbation and reading comics, there was a rallying cry running throughout comics fandom: 'comics aren't just for kids any more'. Mine was the generation that not only grew up with comics, but comics grew up with us.

In my mid teens, at the point when all but the most socially challenged of previous generations had usually given up on comics for more important matters, like getting stoned and getting laid, mainstream comics suddenly got more interesting. They started to deal with issues and experiences that I could continue to relate to. This was the era of *Watchmen* and the *Dark Knight Returns* and the rise of the 'Graphic Novel' (a term that no one has ever been able to define, other than that it's a handy phrase to use at dinner parties when people ask you what you write and you don't want to face the social stigma of admitting you produce something as grubby as comics). Comics began to address adult themes and to embrace more sophisticated narrative and stylistic structures.

They really *weren't* just for kids any more.

The only problem nowadays is that 'comics aren't for kids *at all* any more'. Aside from DC Thompson, very few publishers in Britain will go anywhere near a comic today. Those publishers who do supply the highly lucrative teen and pre-teen market prefer to produce what they call 'magazines for children'. These are intensely bland publications that can be read, even by the youngest children, in less than a minute and are mainly filled with endorsements for kids' cable channels, advertorial for products sold to children and page fillers. Those publications that do feature comics are usually reprinting American material featuring some popular cartoon character.

Comics publishers in the States and even in Europe tend to avoid publishing comics for the children's market as well. Children these days, it's assumed, are more interested in playing with their X Boxes and surfing the net for porn sites.

The dwindling number of children who do still read comics have a hard time of it when they come to try and buy them. Most comic store owners make children feel

Script: Jaspre Bark • Art & Letters: P.J. Holden



BY JASPRE BARK

about as welcome as a weapons inspector in an Al Qaeda compound. The ever present threat of censorship based on the premise that 'a child could walk in here and see that' has driven them to keep as many children out of their stores as possible to avoid just that possibility.

My worry is that if so few comics for children are being produced, where are the comics readers of the future going to come from? Is reading comics going to become an increasingly elderly occupation? Until eventually comics stores start providing courtesy zimmer frames and the comics themselves are filled with adverts for stair lifts and incontinency pants? Will comics as an art form start to die off over the coming decades as more and more of the readership itself perishes each year with nobody left to replace them?

I believe that for the sake of the medium's future the comics industry has to start encouraging more children to read comics and visit comic stores. News stand sales of American comics are extremely healthy on both sides of the pond. The few original British comics for kids like *Toxic*, *The Beano* and *Lucky Bag Comic* are still market leaders in terms of sales. So there is a proven market for kids comics which has not even approached saturation and is ripe for growth.

I think at the heart of the problem lies comics' self image. For all the bravado about comics being, as the French dub it, the ninth art form, those of us involved in the world of comics often feel we have to apologise for them. There is a huge amount of bias and bigotry surrounding the medium; it is still viewed as suspect with few redeeming artistic and educational features. This popular perception can affect the industry's view of itself and those of us involved can begin to wonder if comics, like pornography, are the sort of thing we want to show to children.

The worst fear of course is that we are somehow suspect for still being interested in what is perceived to be a children's pursuit. That if we continue to encourage children to be interested in comics then we'll have to admit that maybe they really *were* 'just for kids' all along. After all, many comic readers are still trying to chase that illicit thrill they got from reading comics as a child, and there's nothing wrong with getting your kicks that way. Nor is there anything wrong with sharing those kicks with our children.

STRIPPED BARE RECOMMENDS...

This issue I'd like to draw your attention to
The Spiral Cage by the exceptionally talented Al Davison. This seminal work was first published in the late eighties but has been re-released with lots of new material.

The Spiral Cage is a superhero comic unlike any other you've ever read. The hero is the artist and writer himself and his main super power is the incredible determination and courage he has shown in not only overcoming the difficulties posed by being born with spina bifida but going on to become a writer, artist and performer of the top rank, a black belt in karate and a master of Zen Buddhism.

It is impossible not to be affected at a deep emotional and spiritual level by Al's work. He is a visionary in the same mould and of the same calibre as William Blake. I can't stress too heavily how much you need to read his work.

The Spiral Cage and *Spiral Dreams* – his latest project – are available from:

Astral Gypsy Press
160b Ivydale Road
Nunhead
London SE15 3BT



theseus, orpheus and a cabbie without 'the knowledge'

Russell Hoban
interviewed by
Andrew
Hedgecock

"Life is just a bowl of cherries. Don't take it serious; it's too mysterious."

His Russell Hoban's eyes sparkle and his chuckle provides the perfect counterpoint to his quotation from Lew Brown and Arthur Henderson's Broadway hit of 1931, a melodic tightrope walk between desolation and rapture covered by the likes of Rudy Vallee, The Platters and Joe Jackson.

When it comes to the bran tub of popular song, Hoban is as deft a dipper as Dennis Potter, illustrating the enigmatic, frightening and painful elements of experience with fragments of singable lyrics – some acerbic, some schmaltzy.

In *Fremder*, for example, Hoban's ludic, poetic and nonlinear tale of dystopian SF from 1996, snatches of Hawkwind, Billie Holiday, Steely Dan, Woody Guthrie, T-Bone Walker and Dory Previn jostle with the words of Wallace Stevens, WH Auden and Oscar Wilde.

But it's Brown and Henderson's bowl of cherries that sums up Hoban's take on life and literature. Now aged 79 and in fragile health, he is nonetheless enjoying a period of astonishing creativity, producing books that wring humour from the darkest and most mysterious aspects of experience. Witty, dreamlike, ironic and disturbing, his fables are serious but never sententious, oneiric but rooted in everyday dilemmas, celebrations of the quotidian and explorations of the esoteric.

I'm visiting Hoban at his home in Fulham. We're perched amid the clutter of his workroom – a wondrous grotto with precarious columns of files and videos, and precipitous walls of books, ornaments and models. I spot an Action Man, a dragon, Mr Punch . . .

DAINGEROUS AROUND HERE

Russell Conwell Hoban was born in Lansdale, Pennsylvania in 1925 to Jewish immigrant parents. A precocious reader and visual artist as a child, Hoban enrolled in art school at 16, but at 18 volunteered for service in World War Two, working as a radio operator, military policeman and messenger. Hoban was, he reports, impeded in the latter role by an appalling sense of direction, adopting the role of latter-day Theseus in order to retrace his journey, using torn up ration boxes in place of Ariadne's thread. Hoban's wartime paper chase finds an echo with the yellow paper scattered by a red bearded man in his black-comedy fable of 1974, *Kleinzeit*.

After the war, and the award of a Bronze Star for bravery under fire, Hoban returned to the US to work as, first, a commercial illustrator and, later, an advertising copywriter. At the same

time he began publishing children's picture books, most notably *Bedtime for Frances* (1960) – the first of his tales of a young badger with an irrepressible imagination. In 1963 he started work on a novel about the allegorical quest undertaken by a father and son pair of toy mice. Completed, published and critically neglected in 1968, *The Mouse and His Child* brought Hoban a crossover adult-child audience and is now seen as a classic.

But it wasn't until Hoban came to London in 1969 that he began writing his compelling, strange and idiosyncratic books for adult readers. 35 years of life in the capital has reworked his accent – a soft but resonant voice retains a faint but perceptible American tang – but the occasional turn of phrase provides a reminder of roots on the other side of the Atlantic. So what drew him to London in the late 1960s?

"British ghost stories and tales of the supernatural brought me to this country. I'm a big reader of these stories and I wanted to spend some time in the London that I read about in them."

For the first time, but not the last, in our conversation, Hoban ventures into his maze of books and films to fetch an item he's keen to discuss: "Don't follow me – it's very dangerous around here."

He sways. "It's further made dangerous by the fact that I have vertigo and lurch a lot."

Returning to his seat he hands me a copy of Herbert Wise and Phyllis Fraser's remarkable and frequently reprinted anthology, *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural*. Hoban pours me a coffee and hands me a plate of biscuits – for a chubby-chops with a sweet tooth like me, it really *is* dangerous around here.

"My favourite writers were mostly Victorian – Algernon Blackwood, MR James, Oliver Onions, Margaret Oliphant – and I knew their London wasn't today's London, but I still wanted to be here. I guess my all time favourite is probably 'The Beckoning Fair One' by Oliver Onions and, after that, 'Casting the Runes' by MR James. I've lots of favourites: there's a wonderful story in there [by Robert Hichens] called 'How Love Came to Professor Guildea'.

"I intended to stay here for two years, but your place tends to be where it happens for you. Without any warning, this was where I made the transition from children's books to adult novels. This is where I fell in love and where we brought up three boys, now grown. And this is where it's kept happening for me in my work: so London is my place."

And Hoban has made London his place. During these past 35 years he has imaginatively transformed it into a more

beautiful and frightening city in books like *Kleinzeit* (1974), *Mr Rinyo-Clacton's Offer* (1998), a disturbing contemporary retelling of the Faust story, and his latest novel, *Her Name was Lola* (2003).

"I'm told my London is very much a personal London – and I suppose that's inevitable. I see with an outsider's eye: maybe I don't take the city for granted the way Londoners do."

Hoban's work has been described as magic realism, surrealism, OuLiPo style game playing, re-mixed mythology and Pythonesque comedy. But the boundlessness and diversity of his work makes attempts at classification frustrating and ultimately fruitless. If there is a common element that cuts across the array of recurring themes and disparate styles it's the oneiric quality of his narratives. Does this too have its roots in the dislocated, estranged vision of a writer who has crossed cultures?

"Well, I've never tried to analyse it and I don't want to be self-conscious about it. I just write it the way I feel it; I write it the way it hits me. For example, in *Turtle Diary*, when William is walking along the street and sees a manhole cover which has the number K257, the Köchel catalogue listing of Mozart's Credo Mass. I can't expect every reader to think of that.

"First of all, the main thing about writing is the communication and the search for meaning in that communication. Everything talks to my characters and everything talks to me. And I talk to myself too. Let me fetch something, if I can do that without breaking a leg . . ."

Hoban rummages in a bookcase and returns with an exhibition programme. "Did you go to the Vuillard exhibition at the Royal Academy? He's my kind of painter."

We examine Edouard Vuillard's *A Family Evening*. Painted in 1895, it depicts a moment of emotionally charged domestic drama. In the foreground is the black silhouette of Vuillard's friend Kerr-Xavier; who is facing his wife (the artist's sister) across the table. It is not possible to make out the features of her face.

"Often in Vuillard's paintings you can't make out the face. He does a lot of interiors – interiors of buildings and interiors of people. He paints the spaces between the faces; and sometimes the faces aren't really there, except as spaces. He's spiritually related to Edward Hopper. Superficially the paintings may not look like Hopper's but, like Hopper, Vuillard paints the immanent desolation of things. These are wonderful paintings."

Hoban's work is characterised by its fizzing language and mordant wit, but



he's clearly on the same quest for the bleak spiritual interiors as Vuillard and Hopper. For *Angelica's Grotto* (1999), his exploration of eroticism, creativity, pornography and obsession, told through a 72-year-old art historian's encounter with a pornographic website, Hoban's research included taking a Rorschach test. The Rorschach inkblots are used by depth psychologists as an indirect, 'projective' tool for the assessment of someone's emotional and intellectual make up. I ask Hoban if the complex assemblage of symbols in his books – and his use of fabulism, genre elements, mythological tales and surreal humour – constitutes the literary equivalent of the Rorschach test, an elliptical and spontaneous insight into the human psyche.

He laughs and gestures to the plate: "Have another biscuit. I never think of my work as symbolic but, then again, I never analyse it at all. And I have to say, smugly, that the people who do analyse it always find things I was never aware

of. I just get by, flying by the seat of my pants, without really having the knowledge they give me credit for. I'm like a taxi driver without the knowledge. You get in my cab and say 'take me to the end of the story'. And I say 'OK', but I have no idea how we'll get there.

"I write without a plan and, as I write, the action develops out of the characters and the characters develop out of the action. And by patiently exploring the characters and the circumstances I keep learning about what the story is. I rewrite constantly, as my understanding of the story changes."

I suggest this ability to take readers on psycho-spiritual mystery tour and to construct a mosaic of meaning from fragmented images and episodes lies in his background as a visual artist.

"I had somebody tell me one time I had eidetic imagery. I can close my eyes and see a horse and the horse's skin will jump the way a horse's skin jumps when it's trying to get rid of a fly. And I have very vivid dreams. People say they

don't dream in colour, but I *always* dream in colour. And my dreams divide themselves into the work of various directors. Sometimes I get low budget dreams with minimal sets and costumes. Sometimes I get big budget productions with great sets and special effects.

"I don't know whether the nuts and bolts in my head are coming loose, but there's a new element in my dreaming. I've been waking up from a dream in which I'm holding a newspaper. And, as I wake up, my eyes open I'm still seeing the newspaper. Then it isn't there – where did it go? So the waking dream follows the sleeping dream. What you might call it a hallucination, but my brain is telling me I'm still looking at that piece of paper.

"I usually wake several times during the night, so I might have a whole series of dreams. Often they'll incorporate elements from a film that I watched before going to bed. Last night before going to bed I watched *Bad Day at Black Rock* and I had a dream where some neighbours I had trouble with where trying to hide a crime: I wanted to find out what it was and I was being threatened. That often happens: I'll take elements from a film that my mind will reorganise into a dream scenario."

The images that crop up in Hoban's dream are sometimes transposed directly to his stories. This, he tells me, was the case with the bus made of rice paper and bamboo and the brass hotel in *Amarylis Night and Day*, his magical realist story of a painter drawn into a labyrinth of sex and death; high art and trash culture; dreams, reality and paradox.

BEAUTY AND TERROR

Dreams are a key source for the tantalising, enthralling and intensely memorable collisions of images and ideas in Hoban's books. Mythology has been another reservoir of allusion and invention – his work is peppered with references to Elijah, the Kraken and, a particular obsession, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

"I mentioned the Orpheus myth in *Kleinzeit* for the first time and it keeps recycling. I was very affected by the Rainer Maria Rilke poem, 'Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes'. In the original German, even if you don't understand it, the texture of the words is rich, but most of the literary translations of Rilke are not very good because the poets who translate are trying to produce something of literary quality. So Gundel translates the poems for me, just giving me the most exact meaning she can find for each word."

Gundel is Hoban's familiar name for his German wife, Gundula, who he met

in 1970 while she was working in Truslove and Hanson in Sloane Street as, in Hoban's words, 'a book siren'. Hoban wanders once again into his dense demesne and returns with a notebook.

He reads Gundel's translation of Rilke's 'First Duino Elegy', a poem that plays a critical part in *Fremder*: "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we only barely endure, And we admire it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us. Every angel is terrible.

"I find that his poems move me quite a bit. You could think about that for weeks: the idea that beauty is only the beginning of terror. Beauty is at one end of the spectrum, which follows all the way to the end and reaches terror. And an angel – because it is the ultimate degree of anything – is unbearable."

There are clear correspondences between Rilke's work and Hoban's – another spiritual fellow traveller. There are similar glimpses into the shadows and glances of beauty and terror throughout Hoban's work, but particularly in his most recent novel *Her Name was Lola*, a tale of love, loss, high and low culture, betrayal, memory and the vexed relationship of writers with their fictional creations. Max Lesser, an American novelist and children's writer living in London, meets the eponymous heroine (his 'destiny woman') and a rank smelling dwarf who turns out to be Apasmara Purusha, a Hindu demon of forgetfulness.

"The heart is empty, the form is emptiness and emptiness is form. You look straight ahead and it's happening at the corner of your eye. I believe, in the world as I experience it and in the self as I experience it, that the whole history of the universe is in each of us. It is not accessible, but it's there. And I think the self goes all the way back to the Big Bang and to the terror of bursting into being. The idea of hell and burning goes all the way back to the Big Bang too."

I ask Hoban if this ancient sense of beauty and terror, and its link to creativity, relates to Jung's notion of the collective human psyche. He grins.

"I'm certainly thinking of something older than any of us: a part of the fabric of being that, if you can absorb it, can become a source of energy and cease to be frightening. I'm smiling because when Gundel used to work as a book siren, I would go in the shop looking for one title and she would sell me eight related books. As a result I bought a copy of Jung's collected something or other: I opened it and thought 'no, I don't want to read Jung', I don't want him to interfere with my own ideas. And so I never have read Jung."

Hoban's characters take their readers

to places of splendour and emptiness, but what enables their creator to peer through cracks in the quotidian and to access the desolate and the numinous?

"I don't understand it all myself but, then again, I don't want to analyse it. Desolation is where I hang out a lot these days. I'll be 79 if I make it to tomorrow. I'm in miserable health: I'm diabetic, I'm lame, I walk with a stick and, going from here to the podiatrist, Gundel pushes me in a wheelchair. My heart is dodgy; I've had by-pass surgery; I've had the bottom lobe of my right lung removed. I've had more surgery than some people have hot meals, and when I get up in the morning I usually feel like shit. It takes me about an hour to get myself fully assembled and in the process of it – putting on my compression stockings and doing this and that – that my mind moves to the chapter I'm working on and what's coming ahead of it and by the time I get to the sink to do my teeth and put drops in my eyes, I'm experiencing *Joie de Vivre*. Why? I don't know! Then I come downstairs for tests, check my insulin, take six other medications – you have no idea how tedious it is. It's a time consuming pain in the ass kind of thing – so where does this *Joie de Vivre* come in? Obviously there's some part of doing what I do that makes it fun for me to be alive. I never expected to live this long and I'm writing faster and faster because I still have so many things I want to try before I hop the twig."

And, in spite of the daily battle with age and fragility, Hoban's *Joie de Vivre* is palpable. As the afternoon wears on, I could swear he's actually starting to look younger. And an astonishing recent burst of creativity – six of his twelve novels were published in the last eight years – demonstrates a commitment to his craft as undiminished as his relish for life.

"When Bloomsbury bought *Angelica's Grotto* I fell into a real happy relationship with Liz Calder. I never get a contract until I deliver the finished book: I do it that way because I never know if I *am* going to finish the book. And I get the whole book done before I deliver it. Liz says she assumes she's going to like whatever I do. That keeps happening and it's so stimulating and so encouraging that I keep seeing things I want to do.

"I don't read contemporary fiction – I work late and watch films and videos when I knock off. And from films I keep learning about my writing. They remind me of two things. One, I want to care about the people – if I don't, forget it, what's the use? Two, I want to care what's going to happen next.

I see a film like *The Prince and the Warrior* [directed by Tom Tykwer, who also did *Run Lola Run*] and I like the way

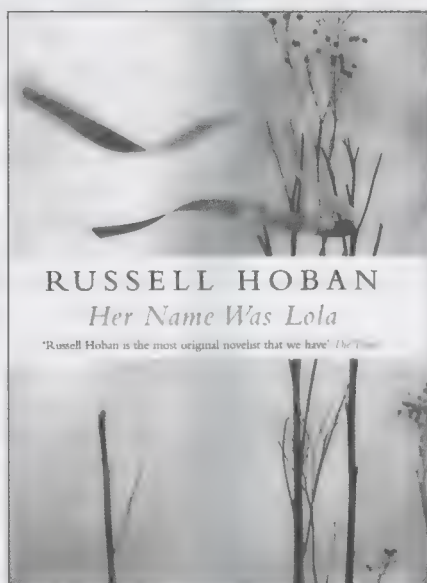
the images overlap and the way connections mingle, and I want to get some of that into what I'm doing now. So that influenced the way I worked on *Come Dance With Me* [Hoban's next book, to be published in 2005]. The main reading I do is when we go to Germany in the summer for three weeks, to Gundel's hometown. Last summer or the one before I read *The Honorary Consul* by Graham Green and *Felicia's Journey* by William Trevor. And I thought 'I really must go deeper into how my people respond to each other'. So that stimulated me to want to get A's reaction to what B has said and B's response to A's reaction into my novels. The other thing that keeps me going is that my books are off the beaten path, certainly, but I've never gotten as strange as I want to be, I've never really let myself go. I'm thinking in terms of plotting, structure, character – every fucking thing."

BLIPS AND FLICKERS

Hoban's 1992 collection of essays, stories and sketches, *The Moment Under the Moment*, illustrates the breadth of his imagination and his gift for playing with language. But nowhere is that gift employed to greater effect than in his best known (and most critically acclaimed) novel, a post-apocalyptic remix of the myth of Pandora's Box, *Riddley Walker* (1980). Riddley tells his story, and reports the fall of humanity after a nuclear holocaust, in a mangled and debased – but vivid and poetic – form of English. At the heart of the story is the legend of St Eustace and a vernacular rendition of the history of the road to nuclear perdition in which 'the Littl Shynin Man the Addom' is pulled apart with the result of the explosion known as the '1 Big 1'.

I ask Hoban if his use of corrupted language to present impoverished thought constituted an exploration of linguistic relativity, the idea that the limits of our language are the limits of our world. Does the decay of language reflect Riddley's exclusion from knowledge and learning?

"It started off in conventional English, but after the first few pages I saw that wasn't right and started corrupting it into Riddley Walker speak, a language that had got worn down but kept words to do with things people didn't understand. For example, it kept 'blips' even though they didn't know what a radar screen was any more, and it kept 'programmed' as a verb. When Orfing meets Riddley close to the end and tells him he had to get out of where he was, he says: 'I had to vote no kind of fence'. It's a play on 'vote no confidence', but a fence is something that protects you from what's outside so



Bloomsbury hb, 256pp, £15.99

he had to recognise he had nothing to protect him from the circumstances in which he found himself. I was looking for these double meanings what the characters said all the time."

Riddley Walker took Hoban more than five years to complete, but it wasn't merely the language that required painstaking revision.

"After the first two years I had 500 pages that weren't right, so I discarded them and went back to page one. I had too many people running around over too much geography and it wasn't concentrated enough. So I concentrated it – I smalled it up. I went ahead on that basis and, that time, it seemed to work for me because I got to the end."

I ask if the book was driven by a genuine fear at the time the Cold War might result in the collapse of the civilisation we'd grown up in.

"Yes, at that time it looked as if somebody might drop the 1 Big 1 at any time. And, it has to be said, George Bush and Tony Blair still might, when they've finished looking for weapons of 1 Big 1."

The theme of technology as source of enlightenment and means of destruction recurs throughout Hoban's work, but is a key element of *Fremder*, his seventh novel, and one that recapitulates the concerns and motifs of its predecessors. I ask if his use of the SF genre reflected an assumption that it could carry a complex set of themes and allusions.

"No, I chose it because I was interested in the phenomenon of flickering. At the time I was asking people if they saw what they saw as a smoothly unrolling spool of film or as flickering. Where there intervals of non-picture between the pictures they saw? I think everybody I asked said they *didn't* see the flickering. But I do. I *sense* it as being intermittent

rather than continuous. I experience the world as being fragmented. I'm intensely aware of the fact that what comes in to the retina and optical nerve is meaningless: we don't actually see anything until the visual cortex tells us what we're seeing.

"I have often been on the tube, looking at somebody's newspaper and it says something like 'Hoban Guilty!' Or I'll be looking for a particular title in this chaos I'm living in and I'll read the title I'm looking for while I'm actually looking at another title. My brain says 'hey baby, this is it . . . oh no it isn't!'

"I re-read *Fremder* recently: I do pretty well touch on all of my major obsessions. I didn't notice that as I wrote it, I was just doing what I do. The derivation of some of the story elements still pleases me. There's Planet Badr al-Budur (known as Badru) where you get the tea towel saying 'I've been through Badru. Have you?' I got the idea from Honolulu International Airport. I went through there in 1993 on the way home from doing a writing workshop in Sai Pan. They had what they called a Mini Hotel: sleep, shower, so much per hour. There was a guy sitting at a desk smiling and saying 'come in'; single beds and iron bedstead with grey prison blankets; a tiny bathroom where there was just enough room to take a shower and use the toilet. The towels were just a little bit thicker than the toilet paper. Very minimal, very Spartan, very monastic, but I had a wonderful night there. It was like a meditation box: it sort of concentrated all the floating elements of the self into one peaceful amalgam. And I've always had a soft spot in my heart for it since then, and so that's where I got the Cube-O-Sleep at Badru."

The interview ends with Hoban reading me an extract from his forthcoming novel *Come Dance With Me*. The female lead is a middle-aged singer with a rock band called Mobile Mortuary and the male lead is a 62-year-old diabetologist at a fictitious hospital. There are references to chaos theory, the loss of a cabin cruiser the river Lea, Hoban's perceptual 'flicker', a Wallace Stevens poem, the ballad 'Herr Oluf' by Johann Karl Gottfried Loewe, Coleridge's 'Christabel' and the myth of the siren-like Erl King's daughter. There are clear cross-references to the rest of Hoban's oeuvre. *Fremder's* planet Badr al-Budur, echoes in the name of the doomed cabin cruiser, the 'Badroulbador', and there's a recitation of the Wallace Stevens poem beginning 'Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbador'. The usual dizzying, exhausting mix: and I can't wait to read it. ■

Outside the Museum Tavern, and I know she's inside, fresh from the East, waiting. I don't want to go in. If the whole of the city was one great pub, I could just stand here outside, and stand her up, and leave. Nothing would change.

"You said you'd be there at half past – I waited for an hour."

"I was . . . I was in the bar all night long. I can't believe you didn't see me."

Being nearby is never enough. You need to be actually present.

The door opened. Someone was coming out. A snatch of conversation: "Of course, the return on investment up there's growing all the time."

Good to know that there were some worthwhile investments left. I pushed past, and went inside.

"So, how was Egypt?"

"Oh, just lovely, it's the perfect time of year. I saw Hasem in Cairo, we were shooting at Saqqara again. He was talking about a job out there, he always does."

I wanted to ask her about the plane journey; she hates flying. I wanted to find out if she'd been back to the Fishawi Café. We'd ended up smoking shisha there on the last night of our holiday. The tables huddled in a busy alleyway, buried deep in the Khan El-Khalili souk. Waiters scuttled between passers-by, tin trays hurtling up and down as they flew over and around heads and shoulders.

Sophie would talk to them in Arabic; she'd been learning it in night school for years. We always got excellent service. We cradled our shisha, protecting the hot coals. Heavy shopping bags bustled by, knocking against us, our rickety table. Mint tea spilled and pooled across it. We didn't really notice until it began to drip over the edge.

Most of all, I remembered the light. White charcoal smoke, winding up from a dozen shishas, condensed it from the air. Improvised streetlamps blazed; inside the café, every surface was dense with melted wax and decaying mirrors. Thick outside walls rose close around us, some hard cream, some a sticky yellow. She leaned in close to me. Her hair, her skin, her smile, were a brilliant luminous gold.

A long time ago.

"How was the flight?"

"Oh – OK . . ."

I'd held her hand for most of the outward flight, and for most of the return trip. She didn't like showing fear. Her grip tightened as we took off, and then again as we came in to land.

"I listened to music. There was a film."

"You enjoyed it?"

"I didn't really get into it."

I hated the thought of her flying alone.

She had to rush off, she had some party or other to go to. She'd promised a friend and she couldn't blow her out. She was always very particular about letting down friends. I didn't join her. I wanted to spend a bit of time just taking things in. Good things happen in the Museum Tavern; it's a lucky place. In 1941, a bomb had crashed through the roof and punched a hole in the floor by the till. It didn't detonate. Nobody had been able to work out why.

I ordered another pint, to celebrate. It was still early, and I had the day's paper to finish reading. I'd kill some time, then head for home. I was part way through the G2 section when someone sat down beside me. I didn't look up. I didn't want to encourage conversation.

"Arne Hudson."

A pause.

"I couldn't help overhearing you guys just now."

A rich, deep, American voice – slow and measured. I kept on reading.

"I think it's great that you guys are giving it another go – you didn't see her waiting for you. Every time the door went . . . she'd look up, away, didn't know what to do with herself. She feels for you, son. You've done the right thing."

I looked up from my paper, ready to shut down the conversation.

He held two tumblers, each full of whisky, catching the light like treacle. "Son, I hate drinking on my own, too much like my old man. Scotch?"

We talked for a while. I told him a little about Sophie and me; how we'd met, how good it had been for a while, how the arguments had begun, how we'd split up. I glossed over the whole april.com thing. I didn't like talking about it much. I told him about Chris and Carticulate.

"A PR and marketing agency? Well, it's a living. I never look down on a man who makes a living for himself."

"How about you, then? A lumberjack?"



It was late, I'd had a few; Arne was built like a lumberjack. A red checked shirt stretched over his concrete-firm shoulders, tight against his squat, muscular physique. Neck like a bull's. He was an older man, maybe early 60s, but he still gave an unforced impression of power and confidence. He must have been formidable in his prime.

"A lumberjack? First time anyone said that . . . No, that's not me."

"So what do you do, then?"

"Well, I've retired now, thank the Lord, consult to keep ticking over, get back up there when I can, but until eight years ago I had the privilege of living upside full time and working Tranquility moonbase as a senior mine camp commander."

Next day, I was doing another new business pitch, in Reading. It was a half hour train ride from Paddington. I spent most of the journey thinking about Arne. I'd asked him some questions about the lunar mining camp, about his life in it. He'd answered calmly and in some detail. When I'd finished my drink I said goodbye and went. I think he was a bit surprised that I left so suddenly.

I'd walked down St Martin's Lane to get to the bus stop at Charing Cross station. The vacant moon hung over me. Arne was convinced that you could see the lights of some of the mining settlements from Earth, when they were in darkness. I looked up once; I didn't look up again.

When the 77A bus arrived, I made sure I couldn't see the moon from my seat.

Reaching Reading and the prospect, I went straight into pitch mode. I beamed when I met him in reception, looked him straight in the eye. He took me into his office. There were pictures of children on his desk, so I asked him about his family. I wanted him to remember a genuine connection with me.

Perhaps he was interested. In any case, he listened to me politely enough. He shook my hand at the door and gave me directions to the station.

There was nobody else around. The warehouses and offices around me looked like upside-down shoe boxes. The road between them was barely sketched in. The prospect had told me how to get out of the industrial estate. For a moment, I couldn't remember if he'd said to go left or right. I wondered if this was how Sophie imagined me spending my days.

We'd argued a lot, towards the end. Difficult times; I was out of work, didn't really believe I'd ever find anything again. april.com had crashed in early 2000. At their peak, my stock options had been worth about a million. My first proper job, after years of freelancing, and I'd made it. Sophie had glittered in my company; I thought I'd struck the motherlode. We'd imagined such wonderful futures.

What a dream our life was! I took her to the best restaurants, we flew abroad at the drop of a hat. Once, she was working on a three week shoot in the Valley of the Queens. Her first shoot as an Assistant Producer, she'd been building up to it for years. She'd been on the phone to me a lot; it was going terribly, clashes with the director and crew. I turned up on a Friday night, surprised her, and took her down the Nile on a felucca for the weekend. I made her Cleopatra, put it all on the gold card. She'd said that it was payback for all the nights and weekends I'd had to work in London.

When the company went down, there was nothing left. I wasn't even paid for my last couple of months work. I'd had to move in with her. It hadn't lasted for long. I was very angry a lot of the time. I'd wanted her to support me, she refused. We argued, non-stop, split up.

I moved into a shitty one bedroom flat in Wandsworth. Chris Carter called up for the *n*th time – he'd tracked me down through mutual acquaintances, the pushy bastard. This time, I didn't fob him off. He wanted me to be his Strategic Development Manager, to develop new marketing strategies for Articulate and its clients. There was nothing else on offer.

Sophie thought I was building myself up again. I wasn't so sure, but I wasn't going to let her see that. We'd started meeting up again, and things were moving on. She did most of the talking.

Arne was another great talker. "God, when I think what I had to go through – I was a test pilot for ten years before anything! And then, von Braun's tests, the fitness, all of it – they built us up for months. Now – well, you just go to Salt Lake and you're in orbit like that, then wherever you want. Son, you got it easy – go for it!"

I'd bump into him every few days, sometimes have a scotch or a couple of pints with him. He wasn't sure

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ROBERTSON

if he liked the Museum Tavern, but had said at least it felt like he was really getting away when he went there. I didn't like it when he talked about the moon. He also believed that the Germans had helped set up Israel in the late '30s ("That's why they didn't make a fuss when we poached von Braun – we were putting far too much money into all that for them to say no."). He didn't seem to know much about the Second World War, either. Apart from that, he was pretty good company.

I'd been moaning about work; Chris was getting me down. He didn't seem to understand what I could do for him.

"Lex, I'll level with you. I don't know why you're still here. You could be in the industry, running a portal; bright guy like you, they'd love you topside. You could be running trades on the mine sites – Lord knows, they need all the help they can get, and they've got money to burn. My God! There's so much up there – and you'd be making a killing, that's for sure."

Arne was convinced. He'd planned a future for me. I'd dump Carticulate, use my dotcom experience to get into space. Once there, I'd achieve my potential, make my fortune, and that would be it. I let him talk for a bit, and then I changed the subject. I knew there was no topside but, if nothing else, his optimism was infectious.

Talking to Arne always cheered me up. He was much more together than you'd have thought. He told me a lot about his family. He was over in London visiting his daughter, who'd just had her first baby. He'd come over with his wife to help out, for a month or two. Every so often, it all got a bit much for him, so he'd pop out for a walk and a drink. Back then, I was surprised that they trusted him to look after himself; I never saw any of them with him.

I didn't spend too long with Arne that night. I had an early start the following day, going to Bath for another pitch. I didn't fancy waiting for a bus, so I got the tube south from Tottenham Court Road.

The carriage was quite full. I couldn't get a seat, so I stood by the door. I was thinking about Carticulate. Arne had inspired me. If I wasn't happy there, it wasn't necessarily a problem. I could change it.

Two men were talking behind me. I was half listening to the conversation. Their investment chat mixed in with my thoughts about Chris. I heard them mention mining. One of them seemed to be talking about the Moon, and then Mars.

The train was juddering into Leicester Square station. I stumbled as I began to turn round, knocked into someone. By the time I'd apologised, we were in the station. The men I'd overheard had got out. There were several people walking down the platform, towards the exit. I couldn't tell which ones they were. The doors closed again, and we moved on.

I got back from Bath, and went straight to meet Sophie. We were still getting used to being together again. She'd badger me to tell her what I was up to at Carticulate. I'd give her the positive version.

She was waiting at the NFT Bar, nursing a glass of white wine. Outside, the booksellers were just packing up for the day. She'd said she had some exciting news,

but she seemed quite down. I told her about Bath, that it had gone well.

"Lex, look – I talked to Hasem today."

"Great – how is he?"

"He's fine – but he's offered me a job – he wants me to go to Cairo full time, be a liaison for crews over there, develop some ideas with him."

"Oh."

"Lex, this is what I've always dreamed of."

"I know. You're going to take it?"

In Bath, I'd thought I'd seen a billboard advertising holidays in space. I was in a cab, heading for the prospect; we were moving too fast for me to read it properly. On the way back to the station, the cabbie had taken me down the same road. Looking up, I could only see pictures of some sort of soap.

I sat down with Chris for our weekly sales update. There wasn't much to report. I was cold calling people from his contact database. Most of them were polite but uninterested. Some promised to keep our details. Hardly any wanted to meet and talk.

"You want me to keep calling these losers? We should be in new markets! This is the wrong time to talk to these guys. Technology's crashed; no one's spending. We need to be moving into new sectors, we need to be somewhere booming."

Chris hated me telling him how to run his business, but I was right about this, so I pushed.



"OK, Lex, if you feel that strongly about it – look into it, do me a report or something, but I don't want it getting in the way of new business, it's not really what I took you on for."

I bit my tongue. I'd got what I wanted.

"To be honest, Lex, I'm a bit disappointed with things. Do what you want, but make sure you get some more leads, that's important, that's what you're here for."

The next time I saw Arne, he was a bit less cheerful than normal. I asked him if he was OK, he said yes, I left it at that. I steered the conversation towards his days in space. He loved talking about his past; I thought it might cheer him up. I was also very curious. I wanted to know more about his world. It sounded so exciting.

"Remember my first time topside, it was '71. One of six missions. Climbed out of the lander, stood there, looked up at the Earth. My God! All that time on another planet. Sure, there were experiments, all that, but hell – they were make time things. Important thing – we were there, we could get there. We were living dreams, back then.

"Went up another two, three times in the early '70s – budgets low while they put money into Vietnam, reparations, proper democracy now. Spent a lot of time going round schools, bright eyed kids – I'd always take quarters with me, ones I'd taken to the moon. Hand 'em out as prizes to the smart ones, the ones with the stars in their eyes."

I let him talk on.

By the mid '90s, the moon was pretty much commercialised, he was consulting for some of the bigger private mining firms, living more and more off share income. He'd struck gold, got in at the start with some of the biggest names out there; now, he never needed to work again.

Arne's life reminded me of the future I'd shared with Sophie – only work when I wanted to, consulting internationally, follow her round the world, let her track me as I went off exploring. We were going to spend months in Egypt – going down the Nile, living in Cairo, she'd make films, I'd write a book, read, whatever.

Arne's conviction was absolute. He had walked in space, and had worked professionally on the moon for five years or more. He showed me the vacuum blossoms on his gut, where his suit had been penetrated by a micro-meteorite, nearly sucking him into the void; he showed me a tiny slab of moon rock that he'd had made into a keyring. He even talked about how much money Carticulate could make if it picked up a few industry contracts.

They called last orders at the bar. Hardly any time seemed to have passed.

Arne stopped me as I stood up to get the last round in. "Son, there's something I'm going to say to you, I'll say it once, and that'll be it."

He was looking at me intently.

"When I come here, it's different. I look round, people aren't happy, the stars don't shine bright enough. I *know*, I've spent my life watching 'em. This isn't a good place for a young man to be, son, you've got to get while the going's good and move. You don't want to waste your life in shitty places like this."

On my way home, something caught my eye – the cover of a magazine in the newsagent's window. It was that week's edition of *Time*. It showed two men in bulky pressure suits standing in a bleak, red tinged landscape. The suits' visors were mirrored; you couldn't see the men's faces. The visors reflected a camera, some buildings, distant red mountains. One of them was hefting a pick axe, the other was holding a briefcase. A headline ran beneath them. It read **MARS: OPEN FOR BUSINESS.**

"You seem very bouncy." Sophie was very good at picking up my moods. "You're almost manic. What's got into you?"

I had a new world inside me. The newsagent had denied all knowledge of that edition of *Time* when I went back; I hadn't been able to find it anywhere else. That wasn't important. I'd seen it, had stood staring at it, hands pressed against the cold glass, reading that single, simple sentence, over and over again. It had been real. A world of miracles had started to blossom.

"Oh, I just want to take advantage of you while you're still here, I don't want to waste a second. Come on!"

A Sunday afternoon on Clapham Common, the air fresh with the first rush of spring. Everything seemed to be possible. Sophie was glowing again, overjoyed by the job, overjoyed to with me. We took off across

the Common running, thrilled. Everything was fantastic.

On our way up Clapham High Street, we'd stopped at a pine furniture shop. Sophie was looking for a new bed; she was going to rent her flat out while she was abroad, and needed to turn her study into a second bedroom. I'd potted round in the background while she haggled with the owner.

Pine furniture shops smell so distinctive; that sweet scent, oozing from everything. I ran my hand along the end of a bed, the side of a cupboard. The wood was sticky, rich with sap. The afternoon sun gilded it, dancing on luminous surfaces. It warmed me as Sophie turned towards me, her face alive with joy as she prepared for her move to the South.

On the Common, she fell into my arms. I felt the heavy, perfect weight of her as she pulled me over too, dense as an ingot, dragging down my heart. We rolled in the grass and I kissed her, her small mouth fiery and hot to the tongue. I felt my stubble rasp across her pale skin, igniting it. Her hair was a golden blaze around her head; her blue eyes burned like the sky, where it flew closest to the sun.

"My God, I could love you so much."

Some kind of heaven.

I didn't spend the whole night with her; I had an early start. I was going to Slough to talk to some clients about rebranding their travel booking system. I hadn't really prepared much for the meeting, but I was on such a high that I didn't really care. I decided to walk home.

The Common opened itself up to receive me, then enfolded me in soft darkness. I passed the bandstand, kept on walking down the fur-grey path. A cloud shifted; suddenly, everything around me was buttered with moonlight.

To my left, black trees in pubic clumps, thick and knotted. A friend went cottaging in there, from time to time. A government minister had been caught out round here; chasing fantasies into the headlines. He'd fallen. I think he now held obscure political office in Wales.

The path leads straight to the road; you come out of the darkness, into the sodium gash of pavement light. A zebra crossing; a bus is coming. I wait, let it shudder past. Look up at the top deck, then, as it breaks out of cloud, at the moon.

It's a half moon, one side soft cream, the other rich with shadow. Light stipples the velvet dark, thick white pricks rained across the black. I recognise the shimmering patterns that Arne has so carefully described; the Silent Fist, the Smiling Cat, the Nickel and Dime, the Others.

New constellations have landed on the moon; all of Arne's moon camps are there. Everything's changed, for good. I'd followed Arne away from the Museum Tavern, away from the dead roads of Holborn and the darkness of that other, hopeless London. I'd taken his advice; I'd got out. Now, I stood beneath a moon spattered with mines, a moon that was pumping the Earth full of wealth. I could rebuild myself on my share of that wealth. I'd broken through, and I would see that breakthrough infect my job, my life, my world.

I never saw Arne again.

He'd told me that he'd had enough of Holborn, and wanted to start meeting somewhere else – somewhere a little closer to his daughter's place. It was on the other side of the Thames, in Southwark. The pub was called The Queen of Hearts.

I still remember the excitement of that journey. I decided to walk. I had an hour or so to kill, and I needed the exercise. I went south to the Thames, and then crossed over to the South Bank. It was a cloudy night. I couldn't see the moon, but I was confident that the new lights spilled across it would still be shining. The world around me was immanent with the golden age of space, with its newly fertile presence.

I couldn't find The Queen of Hearts. The street was narrow, red terraced houses cramped hard against each other, squashed shoulder to shoulder. The pub should have been half way down. Instead, there was a small, modern block of flats, all grey concrete and dull, flat planes. I stopped a couple of people and asked them for directions, but nobody could help.

Sophie moved to Egypt soon afterwards. I went to the airport with her to say goodbye. I watched the plane lift off into the bright open sky from the car park. For once, she hadn't been nervous of flying. She was too excited. I think Chris had sacked me by then.

I felt Arne's disappearance as a personal failure. Perhaps I had written the address of the pub down wrong. One day, I broke off from writing my report and went



onto the Internet. I spent hours trying to track it down. There had once been a Queen of Hearts in Bear Lane. It had been bombed flat during the Blitz.

I am still researching my report. I know that, if I write it well enough, it will reopen the doors that have been closed to me. I've mapped out the economic benefits of investing in the new space operations in some detail. I've explored their workings; the minimum workforce necessary to support profitable mining operations, the need for a magnetic rail gun to shoot processed ore from the lunar surface back to earth, and so on.

Working with the new materials from space, and the new industries needed to service the men mining those materials, we can create a new business paradigm that will revolutionise the economic world. All will be set in a cycle of perpetual profit. New markets will fuel constant economic growth. We shall live effortlessly in a new golden age, greater than any that's been seen before.

I am paying my rent with a new credit card. It will be good for another few months. I live frugally. I believe in the world I am looking for. When I am not writing I walk the streets of London, searching for it. I am committed and determined in my search, for I know it can be found. The moon will light up for me again; I shall count the returning shuttles as they drop like coins from the sky.

I have made a list of the sites of other pubs that were destroyed in World War II. In that other world, I believe

that they survived. I go to them, one by one. Searching for Arne revealed nothing. A young test pilot with the same name had been killed in a car crash in the late '50s. There was nothing else.

Sophie sent me a letter the other day. She told me how exciting life was in Cairo, how happy she was to be out there. Hasem is a well connected man; she's mixing with the highest levels of Egyptian society. She recently appeared in the pages of their version of *Hello*. The woman behind the counter at her grocers had recognised her, and been very impressed. Sophie was overjoyed. I spoke to my mother a few weeks ago; she said she'd heard from her, as well.

I have not told her that I am no longer working for Carticulate. She thinks that I am spearheading an expansion into new business areas. I am not lying to her. When I find that other world again, I shall be a wealthy man. I cannot afford to visit her now. I tell her I am too busy. She understands, and doesn't pressure me.

There are roads on my list that I've not yet been to; one by one, I'm visiting them all. One day, I shall turn into one and find, in place of a drab fifties housing block or a grey, concrete shopping precinct, an old London pub bustling with life and energy. I shall walk into it, and Arne will be sitting at the bar, waiting for me. We will talk again about the future, and the past, and both will be glowing with promise and reward.

Before she left, Sophie took me to Hampton Court Palace. She said she wanted to take me away from it all for an afternoon. I'd told her a little about Arne, but not the full story. Perhaps I'd been wrong not to do so. I'd been drawn into his world by his stories. Maybe they would act as a door for her, as well. I tried to tell her about his life on the moon, but she changed the subject.

Later that afternoon, I caught her looking at me in a peculiar way, somewhere between appraisal and concern. I could understand how she was feeling. We were exploring the maze together. So many narrow green pathways, all confusingly the same. It was so easy to take the wrong turning, so difficult to know which was right. In the end, she let me lead. I'd told her I knew my way around.

We suddenly stumbled on the central area. I'd seen a film, several years ago, in which the hero and heroine had had a picnic there. There had been a small garden; regularly planted trees, rich flower beds at the feet of the hedges, enclosing an elegant central lawn. It was a little piece of paradise.

When we arrived, there was only an empty, muddy quadrangle.

I said, "I told you I knew where it was."

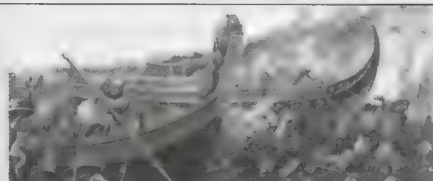
Two sickly trees leant against each other like stubbed out cigarettes. The sky was heavy and cold above the drab green hedges. The blank white moon had appeared, foreshadowing darkness. I stood alone with Sophie at the maze's cold heart, wondering how I'd managed to find it. For a moment I even wanted to tell her that I didn't know how to get out.

Al lives and works in London. This is his first published short story and he's currently working on a first novel. Over the years he's worked as a Namewriter, a Freelance Script Consultant, an Ice Cream Marketeer, and a Latin Teacher.



Lindsay Clarke was inspired inspired to be a writer by a copy of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* that his mother bought from Woolworths. "I was fascinated by the way that the book opened like a magic door on an enchanted territory which was utterly different from the northern industrial landscape around me, yet felt like my imagination's native land. I wrote on into my teens, then made the mistake of reading English at Cambridge as what I thought would be an apprenticeship to becoming a real writer. Three years of literary criticism utterly wrecked my confidence that I would ever write. It took me the best part of 20 years to recover the belief that I might."

The War at Troy (HarperCollins hb, £17.99)



THE MARRIAGE OF MYTH AND REALITY

LINDSAY CLARKE INTERVIEWED BY IAIN EMSLEY



Which is somewhat gratifying to those who have read his novels. His first novel, *Sunday Whiteman*, is a terrifying clash of European and African belief systems. He turned to the Hermetic mysteries for his second novel, *The Chymical Wedding*, won the Whitbread award. "I suppose that it is my most successful attempt to define my preoccupations – it was pretty much this boy's own book of everything at the time I wrote it. But I was trying too hard and the trying shows. If I were to rework it, it would be shorter and the prose would be sharper now." *Alice's Masque* is a reworking of Gawain and the Loathly Lady myth and is probably his most adventurous in terms of writing style.

Lindsay Clarke usually writes very slowly, which is why he has produced so few books, and the writing is usually an exploration for him. "I know where I want to start and I have a sense of where I'm trying to go, but the rest is a matter of feeling my way as I write, hoping to be taken by surprise. If I'm not surprised, then the reader won't be either, and it's a dull book that holds no surprises. *The War at Troy* was different in that the broad outlines of the story had been in place for nearly three thousand years, so I was free simply to explore the language in my efforts to be faithful to my own imaginative response to the material. Because of that, it came very quickly – the entire thing was written in just over four months, which for me was an unprecedented, hectic and exhilarating way to write. More like being a pipeline than an engineer!"

What links all of his novels is a sense that he navigates the boundary between fantasy and mainstream writing, creating a mythical (as opposed to magical) realism. "I suppose all authors have to answer to the particular claims of their own imagination. For me, the mainstream novel has become (by and large) too preoccupied with an ironical and sceptical view of human nature and tends to overvalue it (even in its negative commentary) as if we were the be-all and end-all of life on this planet. I find that too narrow, too limited and finally too arrogant a view of our place in the scheme of things. I see the responsive human imagination as a filament of an intelligence that is larger, wiser and more mysterious than our own – the planet's intelligence, if you like. So I'm interested in telling stories in which the conventional, sceptical, secular view of things breaks down under pressure from those larger claims, and then to explore what might happen on the far side of that breakdown. At the same time I want to keep my stories as credible as I can as an account of fictional events in a recognisable world with familiar personal, social and political pressures, so that my stories reflect and dramatise the evolution in human consciousness that I believe is trying to happen in our time. A complete departure into fantasy would lose some of that crucial sense of betwixt-and-between-ness. So here I am, somewhere in the middle, trying to hold the opposites together – a tension which constitutes one of the principal themes of my work, but isn't it also the way that something new gets made for life?"

His latest novel, *War at Troy*, retells the events of the Trojan War from the initial quarrel to the war itself. "*The War at Troy* has an odd history. It was commissioned as the first of a two volume retelling of the myths of the Trojan War and its aftermath, which I'd proposed because I wanted a lively and accessible version of those tremendous stories to be around for my grandson to read in a few years time. But once I'd started to write, I got possessed by the power of the material, and what was supposed to be a 180-page retelling of the myths grew into a fully-fledged 450-page novel of the passions. It differs from most of my earlier work in that I was adapting existing material to the demands of my own imagination rather than inventing the storyline from scratch. All of my novels have a mythological un-

derpinning – though it may not always be evident on the surface. *The Chymical Wedding* reworks the archetypal structure of the myth of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in contemporary form, and *Alice's Masque* does the same with the story of Gawain and the Loathly Lady. *Parzival and the Stone From Heaven* was an attempt to find a wider audience for the storyline of Wolfram von Eschenbach's myth of the Grail, which is one of the great adventures of the European imagination. So I suppose that there is a certain continuity of interests and preoccupations between those novels and this one.

"There is archaeological as well as literary evidence for a historical war at Troy, and it's not hard to work out what must have

honour their role in our lives as well as dramatising the familiar conflicts of the historical human condition."

The story is told from the perspective of the bard, Phemius, who binds the different threads of the tales together. "When I was looking for a way into the book it occurred to me that a narrator who was close to the stories but had taken only a small part in them might provide me with a useful voice that could point up the blurred lines between myth and history and the relativity of truth. That's how I used Phemius, though I also took the liberty of writing in ways that would never have occurred to him about things he couldn't possibly have known. Novel-writing is largely a matter of smoke and mirrors!"

that it seems there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Yet in both cases, we had the war, of course! The stories of the Trojan war honour courage throughout, but I hope that my version of them shows that their whole drift is towards a horrified acknowledgment that war is always a disaster of which the harvest is suffering and the further, epidemic extension of conflict. It seems that we have to keep on telling ourselves such stories until we truly hear them.

"As always we're living in the best of times and the worst of times, but I do feel that an important evolution in consciousness is trying to happen right now, and whether or not we can survive decently as a species depends, in my view, on its ac-

"Myths are the only means by which we can address the big questions that surround our lives"

been some of the historical, political and economic factors behind such a war. So it would have been possible to handle the material as a conventional historical novel, omitting the gods (as I believe the film *Troy* does) and simply chronicling the human drama, both personal and political. But part of what fascinated me about this story was the way it takes place at the intersection between myth and history. The story begins with a quarrel among the gods, and it involves interactions between divinities and mortals that belong to the world of myth – a world which the dominant, literalistic and skeptical culture of our own time too often fails to honour as it should.

"Myths are the only means by which we can address the big questions that surround our lives – what kind of creatures are we? why are we here? what will become of us? – and whether we are conscious of it or not, we live inside the myths by which we try to answer those questions. The characters and situations of the great mythic stories incarnate and dramatise patterns of conflicting energy that are always at work inside the human psyche. They provide both a mirror on inward process (which is why the analytical psychologists are so reliant on them) and a map to negotiate our way through the contradictions that rack our lives. And the gods really are immortal because the powers they represent are always present within and between us as what James Joyce called 'the grave and constant' matter of our lives. Where the Christian tradition says 'God is love', the Greeks would have said 'Love is a god' or 'War is a god', for example. Such gods never die because they endure from generation to generation, and the challenge is to bring them into consciousness so that we can relate to them creatively rather than being overwhelmed by their impersonal power. That's why myths matter and always will, and I wanted to write a book that would

The novels which most engage Lindsay Clarke most are those which offer a fictional equivalent to a rite of passage – an initiatory ordeal of the imagination in which, through what Bachelard called 'a homeopathy of anguish', the reader identifies with the characters as their consciousness evolves. Among the writers who do this best for him (because they taught him most) are the ancient and medieval romance writers, Shakespeare, Emily Bronte, Nathaniel Hawthorne, D.H. Lawrence, John Cowper Powys, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, Malcolm Lowry, Patrick White, Lawrence Durrell, William Golding, John Fowles, and Doris Lessing.

"I'm not sure whether writing does help shape world views (though obviously I hope so), but people's world view is certainly shaped by stories (myths), and therefore a great deal depends on the kind of stories we tell each other. The imagination has two related aspects – the inventive aspect and the ethical or sympathetic aspect, by which we perceive the world from points of view different from our own and begin to feel compassion for others. So it's the responsibility of the writer, as I see it, to tell stories which reflect the complexity of the world we inhabit (without evasion or sentimentality) while at the same time widening and deepening such compassionate awareness. The more people we can touch with such stories the better for all of us.

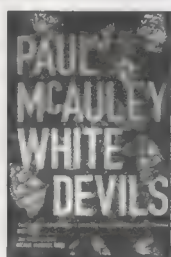
"Yes, I was watching the war unfold in Iraq as I wrote *The War at Troy* and was appalled by how little we seem to have learned from 3,000 years of violent history. What both *Troy* and *Iraq* show us is that war is not inevitable unless we choose to make it so; that it's much easier to get into a war than it is to get out of it; and that everyone caught up in the inexorable logic of such violence is corrupted by it. I was also struck by the parallel between the myth that insists that Helen never went to Troy and the fact

complishment. I'm thinking particularly of the unprecedented number of people who are seriously engaged in the quest for individuation through greater self-knowledge, and the simultaneous emergence of wider ecological awareness – the sense that all things are inseparable, and that what we do to the planet and to each other, we do also to ourselves. Related to both of these developments has been the long overdue revaluation of the feminine perspective on experience and a new feeling for the soul (the individual soul as a part of the soul of the planet), which got lost in the scientific scramble for managerial power and wealth. I genuinely believe that we are both the case for hope and the authors of our own despair, that we are as capable of visionary heights of compassionate awareness as we are of great evil. But I rather suspect that the breakdown of a lively sense of community, an absurd education system, the crazy spin and jangle of the media and political worlds, and the appalling injustices of a planet run as though it were a casino have left us so far estranged from a sane sense of the true dignity of the human and planetary souls that things will probably have to get worse before sanity is restored – and I'm not sure that we've left ourselves with time enough for that. But we have to live as though it were possible, and everything I write is an attempt to play a creative part in the changes that need to happen.

"I'm currently working on Volume Two – not sure of the title yet, but it's the sequel to the Trojan War and tells of its aftermath in the ordeals and adventures of Odysseus, Agamemnon, and the other heroes on their return home. But I also have on the stocks a longish initiatory novel called *Sun at Midnight*, which I've been working on for nearly 10 years and is almost done; so I'm eager to get back to it when the *Troy* Story is complete."

WHITE DEVILS
PAUL MCAULEY

Simon & Schuster hb, 521pp, £12.99



Several decades of war and bio-terrorism have left the world in a bad way and Africa has suffered more than most. Nick Hyde is a charity worker in the Congo, visiting sites of guerrilla atrocities and bearing witness to what has occurred. On one such mission his party are attacked by white skinned anthropoids of an unknown species. His co-workers and their military escort are wiped out. Nick himself only just escapes with his life, but upon returning to civilisation he finds the authorities reluctant to believe his story, preferring instead to blame the atrocity on white painted rebels. The evidence he has brought back, a dead anthropoid and a baby who survived the original slaughter, mysteriously disappears, and pressure is brought to bear on Nick to toe the party line. It becomes obvious that high ranking officials in Obligate, the transnational that, for all practical purposes, governs the Congo, are involved in a cover up. Nonetheless Nick persists with his story and carries out investigations of his own. He learns of Pleistocene Park, an attempt by scientists to recreate prehistoric life forms, which was abandoned during the years of chaos, and that one of these scientists is now working for Obligate. With Elspeth Faber, the daughter of another scientist involved in the project and since murdered, Nick heads off into the Dead Zone, an area that was devastated by a liquefying virus, in search of the truth, though first he must confront not only external enemies but also the dark secret buried in his own past.

Among others, the publishers name drop Michael Crichton in the advertising blurb, and *White Devils*, which is billed as 'the first genuine 21st century thriller', reads like nothing so much as a cross between *Jurassic Park* and *Mad Max*. McAuley gives us a convincing picture of the world gone mad, with no-go areas and private armies, biological terrorists and profit-hungry transnationals rampant, and on the latter count the book contains some interesting and provocative ideas about the role of such institutions in the Africa of the future, with a welcome recognition that big business is not evil *per se*. The author's grasp of technology also seems assured, though he doesn't exploit the white devils as well as he might and the final revelation about their true nature is telegraphed, so that

the closing chapters all have an inevitable feel about them, as the action unfolds in precisely the manner the reader expects. My biggest problem with the book though was with the character of Nick Hyde, who I found somewhat tedious and a little two-dimensional, while the idea of a grown man hiding from his mother, as Hyde does, and the romance of convenience with Elspeth, neither of which adds anything much to the story, contributed to my general feeling of dissatisfaction with the guy. The baddies in *White Devils* seem somehow more rounded and interesting than their opposite numbers. In particular there is the larger than life Cody Corbin, a fanatic waging a one man war against genetic manipulation and those who practice it, a Green activist with a ruthless streak and weaponry to match. I could have done with learning a lot more about where he came from and what motivates him.

McAuley tries hard to make the story grip, but ultimately *White Devils* is a somewhat superficial production, overlong on action and a tad short on substance, written one suspects with an eye on the bestseller charts and with film options in mind (but more *Congo* than *Jurassic Park* I fear). I didn't dislike it, but definitely felt my time could have been better spent.

ANTWERP
NICHOLAS ROYLE

Serpent's Tail pb, 288pp, £10

Cult film director Johnny Vos is on location in Belgium, making a bio pic about the surrealist artist Paul Delvaux. His method involves trying to get inside the painter's mind by creating living tableaux of his most famous pictures, but a serial killer is abducting the



PETER TENNANT REVIEWS
BOOKS

prostitutes Vos is using as extras. Their bodies turn up mutilated and wrapped in video tape of the films of Belgian director Harry Kumel. Connected to this is the so-called Last House on the Left, a building occupied by prostitutes and fitted up with web cams so that voyeurs can observe their activities 24/7. Of particular concern is the anonymous Jan, a customer who appears to be obsessed with the beautiful Danuta. In town to interview Vos is film critic Frank Warner, who is asked to report on the murders when they begin, a job complicated by the presence of his girlfriend. When Sian disappears, perhaps the killer's latest victim, the crimes become of personal interest to Warner, who is suspicious of Vos, but he can prove nothing and the Belgian police seem indifferent, so the film critic must take matters into his own hands.

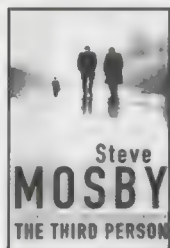
Though self-contained this cleverly crafted novel is also in part a sequel to Royle's previous book, *The Director's Cut*, giving rise to one or two non sequiturs in the plot, and picks up on the writer's personal concerns with the vision of the painter Delvaux, the magic of film and the fascination that abandoned buildings exercise over the human psyche. Implicit throughout is how art and the medium of film, or more purely the making of fantasies, can inform every aspect of our lives, with some characters whose entire existence is acted out in the camera's glare. For the people who walk the streets of Royle's *Antwerp* such matters are not just intellectual abstractions but of vital concern, as for example with Frank and Sian; the problems in their relationship are encapsulated in differing responses to the work of Johnny Vos, who Frank admires while Sian regards him as a misogynist. The two of them are so obviously in love but at the same time kept distant from each other by

inconsequential things so that it takes her abduction to clarify their depth of feeling for each other and, as elsewhere, the deftness with which such subtle nuances of personality are captured is a hallmark of Royle's work. The other characters are just as finely drawn, from Danuta who is making the best of a life she was forced into through to Vos whose obsession with Delvaux is explained by an incident in early adulthood. Of particular note is the depiction of the unnamed killer, given a second person voice to chilling effect, so that we can never be sure he isn't one of the named characters, the story of an unhappy childhood and perhaps inevitable growth into the paradigm monster, whose actions seem bizarre to everyone else but conform to some internal logic of his own. Few killers in the annals of crime fiction combine the mundane and the bizarre to such telling effect, making the likes of Hannibal Lecter and Norman Bates seem almost two-dimensional by comparison.

Another joy of the book is Royle's assured sense of atmosphere, the skill with which he brings to life the abandoned buildings and isolated places that are the stage set on which his cast act out the drama, so that the reader can sense the decay and the hint of an emptiness at the heart of modern civilisation itself, perhaps mirrored in the ineptitude of the Belgian police and the moral nullity of the Last House on the Left. The only weak note is struck by the book's inconclusive ending, which on the one hand seems wholly appropriate, but on the other, in filmic terms, it's almost as if Royle wants to keep his options open as regards a further sequel. However this is only a quibble and should not detract from the overwhelming merit of this complex and absorbing novel, a work of ambition that will reward several readings.

THE THIRD PERSON STEVE MOSBY

Orion hb, 264pp, £9.99



haunted by feelings of guilt over the disappearance of his girlfriend Amy. As a student she was raped and Jason feels that he was not supportive enough in helping her deal with this, and so, in an effort to understand the psychology of

men who rape, she went off to meet a sex offender with whom she made contact through the internet, a rendezvous from which Amy never returned. The police hold out little hope, but Jason refuses to accept defeat, neglecting his job in favour of trawling little known corners of the internet in search of leads. Eventually he hooks up with Kareem, who he believes to have been Amy's last contact, and through posing as a young girl who wants to be raped he lures the man into a trap. But this is just the start of Jason's journey into the heart of darkness. He himself is a suspect in the case of another missing girl, and there are powerful people with a vested interest in having Claire found. She stole something of value from them and they want it back. Jason fears that both Claire and Amy were the victims of an artist working in a unique and deadly new medium, one with the ability to fill his audience with either joy or ultimate terror. He follows a trail that leads him from a rich collector to the underbelly of the criminal world, along the way making discoveries of both a universal and personal significance.

This first novel by Steve Mosby is packed with intriguing ideas and theories, and central to many of them is the concept of text as a living entity, beings that mutate and evolve, and for which mankind is simply a means of reproduction. One can find similar scenarios in the annals of genre fiction, such as Leiber's *The Black Gondolier*, but Mosby brings to his project a conceptual daring that makes the idea sound not only plausible but in fact a rather obvious development, giving us the intriguing prospect of ecological 'terrorists' who help the process along, while his idea on how such a thing could be put to use by the criminal fraternity is worthy of a Moriarty. Add to that a wealth of incidental invention and the end result is a perfectly credible backdrop for this grim and compelling story of times to come. Jason is the archetypal anti-hero, a good man who has become corrupted by obsession, willing to kill and put friends at risk for the sake of his worthy cause. And at back of it all there's a painful honesty, a realisation that he himself is in some way to blame for all that has happened, that if he had said the right thing at the right time, then maybe none of it would have happened. The revelation of his guilt is a powerful part of what drives the narrative on, while Jason's reflections on his life and society, his feelings about love and sexuality, add to the richness of the text, making us identify with him and care about what happens.

The book does have several lapses of logic, scenes in which the way the characters behave doesn't quite add up,

but they don't detract from the overall excellence of this impressive debut novel, which brings to mind the daring and genre juggling antics of Michael Marshall before he decided to drop the Smith in exchange for a bigger audience, but written with a sensitivity and feeling for the people involved that is all Mosby's own. Highly recommended.

THE ETCHED CITY K.J. BISHOP

Tor pb, 332pp, £10.99



Gwynn and the healer Raule were once comrades in an army of freedom fighters, but now they are fugitives, constantly on the move to keep that vital one step ahead of their enemies. Thrown together by force of circumstance they flee the Copper Country for parts unknown, ending up in the city state of Ashamoil, where Raule finds work caring for the poor at a charity hospital, while Gwynn is employed by Elm, a crime lord whose main business is trafficking in human slaves. Gwynn buys an etching of a city scene, charmed by the fact that he himself appears in it, and sets out to learn the whereabouts of the mysterious artist. Her name is Beth and the two begin a passionate affair, but there is something strange and otherworldly about her, so that Gwynn never feels secure in their love and this feeling of dislocation casts a wider net. Ashamoil itself is subject to eerie visitations, with natural law perverted, signs and portents on every street corner, foretelling a crisis for the Elm's organisation and personal tragedy which will plunge both Gwynn and Raule into deadly peril.

Reading this put me somewhat in mind of King's *Dark Tower* milieu, through its use of gunslingers and a comparative level of technology, though Bishop is a superior prose stylist and her agenda (possibly) far more subtle. The plot hangs together perfectly, with every detail fitting into the whole and elements of the everyday and mystery intricately laced together, and there is a compelling subtext taking on the nature of art and faith, love and duty, sacrifice and redemption, seen most obviously in the conversations that take place between Gwynn and Rev, a priest who has taken on himself the task of saving the gunfighter's soul. The characters are beautifully drawn, with Elm and his gang of miscreants brought to vibrant life on the page. They are undoubtedly criminals and people we would normally seek to avoid, but the author

makes them seem strangely appealing, humane even by their own lights. In addition Bishop brings consummate skill to her depictions of places and events, making it all seem somehow wonderful, even the most ordinary happening, while she demonstrates an especial flair for writing set pieces packed with action, giving us such memorable scenes as the fight in the ruined city, the visit to an isolated 'resort hotel', and the full scale battle on a bridge between Elm's gang and the forces of law and order. Her planning is meticulous and the attention to detail cannot be faulted. The end result of all this care and concern is a novel that, while obviously indebted to the whole body of generic fantasy, is a singular and remarkable work of imagination, dazzling with its insights and the sheer beauty of the prose in which they are framed, a small masterpiece by a writer of considerable talent who is destined to go on to bigger and better things if *The Etched City* is anything to judge by.

DEMONIZED CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

Serpent's Tail pb, 241pp, £10



This is the fifth collection of short stories that I've read by Fowler and in many ways the strongest, with seventeen pieces that ably capture the terrors of urban life and human nature, offering contrasting visions of bleakness and redemption, all couched in Fowler's typical laidback prose.

'We're Going Where the Sun Shines Brightly' borrows from the film *Summer Holiday*, using it as a vehicle to tell the story of four young men whose hopes for the future are soured by a vision of what actually lies ahead of them, a common enough theme in supernatural fiction but here made special by a humour and lightness of touch that throw the final revelation into sharper contrast. 'Hitler's Houseguest' is less substantial and somewhat fanciful as regards plot, though rich in detail of life at Berchtesgarden as a reporter tries to persuade the woman he loves to elope with him but instead receives a premonition of absolute evil. 'Dealing with the Situation', again slightly contrived, is nonetheless a compelling picture of a woman whose life is unravelling while she pretends all is well, shot through with a bitter irony and bearing witness to the human capacity for self-delusion. In 'The Green Man', originally published in *The 3rd*

Alternative, a jealous husband finds himself angered by the attentions a baboon pays to his wife, a story that runs along familiar tracks for much of its length but ultimately wins the reader over through its convincing psychology and the ambiguity buried in the plot. 'Breaking Heart' is slight, a moody depiction of two young women on the pull and the duplicity of men, while the ironically titled 'Where They Went Wrong' looks at the relationship between two serial killers, giving us a marriage made in hell and detailing the childhood events that gave rise to such monsters of the mundane.

'In Safe Hands' and 'Seven Feet' both hint at terrible things in hiding behind the everyday, the first with its chilling exposure of an anti-Semitism that is so seamlessly incorporated into modern life no one even suspects its existence, a telling variation on the theme of the madman who is shown to be correct in his paranoia, whereas in the latter story we are shown in frighteningly plausible terms a London of the future infested with rats as the setting for an obscene attempt to placate the old gods. 'American Waitress', which was originally published in *Crimewave*, captures the quiet dignity of a working class woman persecuted by a rich pervert, finding heroism in a stoic refusal to give in to temptation, while 'Above the Glass Ceiling' deftly satirises the atavism of the business world when a female executive inadvertently joins a select boy's club of those willing to kill to succeed.

'Personal Space' is one of the most harrowing tales I have read, rendering the fate of an elderly lady who becomes a squatter in her own home when it's taken over by drug addicts. The narrative is informed by a terrible anger at the plight of those who are abandoned by society, and yet in the person of the narrator Fowler finds a quiet dignity and tolerance that eludes her persecutors and ultimately moves the reader far more than the terrors that are inflicted on her. The story deserves to be in every Year's Best anthology going. 'Hop' is a story that plays slight of hand with the reader's perceptions, giving us a man who on the surface appears to be a paedophile but in reality something entirely different is going on, while 'The Scorpion Jacket', one of those Arabian fantasies Fowler is so fond of, has a skilled tailor delightfully outwitting an evil Sultan, a slight story compared to the others but immense fun. The quasi-documentary 'Feral' catalogues some of the wildlife populating our city streets, a witty and amusing examination of urban life. 'One Night Out' is a simple, though not simplistic, ghost story allowing a man to

make peace with the spirit of his father, while 'Emotional Response' has a woman wreaking terrible revenge on the man who wronged her, ultimately demonstrating that revenge not only is a dish best served cold but sometime should be left off the menu altogether. Finally 'Cairo 6.1' posits a society in which euthanasia is practised, though one man finds that the promised blissful death is an illusion. It is a fitting end to a strong collection, one that shows Fowler has lost none of his ability to give us convincing stories that entertain while at the same time telling us rather more than we perhaps want to know about where society is heading.

SPONDULIX PAUL DI FILIPPO

Cambrian Publications hb, 345pp, \$50
www.cambrianpubs.com



Rory Honeyman, after a somewhat shambolic early life as the son of a bee farmer, an Olympic diving champion, draft dodger and circus performer, washes up in Hoboken as the proprietor of

Honeyman's Heroes, a delicatessen producing the best sandwiches that can be bought for love or money. Unfortunately things aren't working out too well for Rory in either department, what with his girlfriend having left him for another man and the sandwich business hardly setting the world on fire. His immediate problem is retaining the services of sandwich maker par excellence Nerfbal, who has this antiquated idea about being paid for his work. Roy's solution is the spondulix, an IOU note which promises the bearer a certain number of sandwiches and with which Nerfbal should be able to ingratiate himself with the Beer Nuts, a gang of oddballs and vagrants with whom he is lodging in an abandoned brewery. It's conceived of as a stopgap measure and nothing more than that, but before long all sorts of people start showing up with spondulix in their possession; Rory has unwittingly become involved big time in the barter economy. Mad genius and Beer Nut supremo Erkonig, the man who took Rory's girlfriend, has joined forces with a modern day snake oil salesman (ie entrepreneur) to launch a full frontal attack on the world's economy and before you can say compound interest the use of spondulix has spread worldwide. All Rory can do is stand by helpless as his life is whipped out of control and hope to get out from under

without being too badly hurt.

This is billed as 'A Romance of Hoboken', but while the city across the Hudson from New York is the scene of much of the action and dealt with fairly, it doesn't really come alive in any significant way and is not as central to events as that subtitle would suggest. Instead what we get is an ensemble cast of larger than life characters reminiscent of the work of writers like John Irving and Tom Robbins, particularly in the early stages of the novel, with its detailed account of Rory's family history and his adventures in adolescence and on the road. While hardly convincing, the basic premise is fascinating and worth the necessary suspension of disbelief to see where Di Filippo will go with it and the end result is never less than entertaining, as one delightful absurdity is piled on top of another. The frenetic invention of the book is its most appealing quality, with characters who are wonderful eccentrics, each a study in idiosyncrasy and appealing in the way that such people invariably are, at least in fiction, for the arbitrariness of their motives. This is not a great novel by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a book that is great fun for the reader, and in addition is a thing of beauty in its own right, with impressive production values throughout and a selection of surreal black and white photographs to complement the text. Now I wonder if the publishers will accept luncheon vouchers in exchange for a copy. Somehow I think not.

FACES OF MIST AND FLAME JON GEORGE

Tor pb, 390pp, £10.99



Scientist Serena Freeman, a child prodigy and now one of the most advanced thinkers in the world, has developed a time machine, a device she must keep secret from the authorities for fear

of the uses to which it might be put. Inspired by a photograph on the wall of the rooms where she lodges, a disembodied Serena travels back to World War II and takes up residence inside the mind of Phoenix Lafayette, a combat correspondent with the American army trying to recapture the island of Guam from the Japanese. His family originally came from Guam and, guided by Serena's voice inside his head and ancestral memories of the island's myths, Nix decides to complete a series of tasks equivalent in their own way to the labours of Hercules, a kind of sympathetic magic to guarantee his own

survival through the hell of wartime. As events unfold he begins to believe that Serena is real and forms an emotional attachment to her, while Serena herself reciprocates his affection, but she is increasingly threatened by the powers that be and must devise a plan that will enable the two of them to escape in time to a place where they can live together in peace.

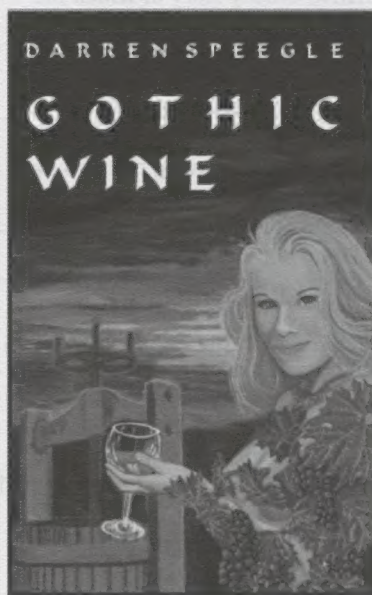
This first novel by Jon George, a writer who has been active in the independent press for several years now, carries more than its fair share of contrivance. Serena's ability to travel through time is nothing more than fantasy given a technical gloss and the decision to emulate Hercules, which calls to mind Waldrop's *A Dozen Tough Jobs* and other works that have played fast and loose with Greek myth in a modern setting, such as *O Brother Where Art Thou*, seems entirely arbitrary. The wartime scenes can't help

but remind readers of *Band of Brothers* and *Saving Private Ryan*, but the quintessential seriousness of it all is undercut by the curious decision to name the soldiers in Nix's platoon after members of the E Street Band, perhaps intended as an ironic comment on present day criteria of heroism, but as a fanatical Springsteenista it got my dander well and truly up.

However these are quibbles and distractions which needn't concern the reader unduly, as what remains once they are sidelined is very impressive indeed. George's account of the original labours of Hercules, intercut with Nix's adventures and written in a slightly breathless and anachronistic prose style that is a delight to read, provide welcome relief and hilarious counterpoint to the unfolding wartime drama. The scenes of combat are drawn with an enviable skill and verve, bringing to memorable life the old adage that 'War is hell', capturing

GOTHIC WINE

by Darren Speegle



"An exquisite collection of literate and evocative stories, opening up a window into a fascinating, if eerie Europe."-Charles de Lint

"Darren Speegle delivers the reader into landscapes of haunting spiritual menace."-Graham Joyce

"Stories like a draught of fabled German ice wine, possessing an unforgettable sweetness that only arises when cruel frost is applied to the grape."-Paul di Filippo

from Aardwolf Press, publisher of

ECHO & NARCISSUS,

nominated as best first novel of 2003 by

The International Horror Guild

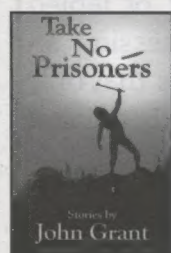
www.aardwolfpress.com

perfectly the camaraderie and desperation of men who will grasp at practically any straw to survive, no matter how unlikely (perhaps the real point of the Hercules thing), while against that is set memories of Nix's life during time of peace, a largely carefree existence which will strike a note of recognition with many, suggesting the fragility of the good times for us all. George's characterisation too is handled with aplomb, making his people as real as we ourselves and giving his heroes feet of clay (Nix, as an example, definitely has an alcohol problem). Almost peripheral to the story, but always there in the background and informing everything else are the myths and legends of Guam itself, and in a subtle way aspects of World War II become a part of that ongoing mythology (George's original inspiration for *Faces of Mist and Flame* was the iconic photograph of American soldiers raising the flag on Guam), suggesting some level of truth beyond what we know of the ordinary and everyday, that people are far better than we allow them to be.

This is a flawed book, but its flaws are those of ambition and concern to do right by the people whose story the author feels compelled to relate. They are easily forgiven and what remains is more than enough to reward the reader. To delve within these pages is to encounter the work of a writer with a genuinely distinctive and compelling voice, a narrative filled with compassion for the foibles of this sad puppet of flesh and blood that is man.

TAKE NO PRISONERS JOHN GRANT

Willowgate Press pb, 248pp, \$13.95
www.willowgatepress.com



John Grant is a writer whose work covers the waterfront, slipping comfortably into such arbitrary categorisations as Science Fiction and Fantasy, Horror and Crime, or eluding easy classification altogether, a diversity that is reflected in this collection of fifteen stories from Willowgate, with the quality of the prose and the calibre of the ideas they convey as the only common denominators.

There are however areas of overlap and connectivity between individual stories, such as similar sounding names that recur in different contexts, a ploy reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's collection *The Lottery and Other Stories*, among others, and clusters of thematically linked stories.

One such grouping consists of 'I Could Have a General Be/In the Bright King's Arr-umm-ee' and the more prosaically titled 'Sheep', contrasting fantasies of a baroque splendour, with the former telling, in a lilting singsong language, of how a beautiful princess is betrayed by the man to whom she has given her heart, while in the latter the two are translated into mythic figures wandering through a barren landscape. 'A Lean and Hungry Look' is a pastiche of Agatha Christie style crime fiction, with the murder taking place during a performance of *Julius Caesar* by the local amateur dramatic society, a light-hearted story that will tax neither the reader's little grey cells nor his patience. The character of Inspector Romford is reprised in 'A Case of Four Fingers', another pastiche (this time of crime cosies in a rural setting, such as *Midsomer Murders*) but far more inventive, in that the story is set in the wonderfully named Cadaver-in-the-Offing, the archetypal village where detective stories take place, so that Romford must tackle not only killers but archetypal figures and philosophical conceits as well.

Lead story 'Wooden Horse' will already be familiar to TTA readers, an engaging and beautifully paced alternative history story in which the true nature of reality is gradually revealed through the protagonist's love of old World War Two black and white films in which events are depicted in fantastical terms, with a particular joy the way in which, having come to like and identify with the obsessive film fanatic, the reader then has the rug pulled out from under his feet as the man's real personality emerges. More overtly SF, 'The Glad who Sang a Mermaid in From the Probability Sea' is slightly less convincing, with the real strength of the story rooted in its backdrop, the depiction of an elder 'faery' race co-existing with mankind and attuned to the universe, only to find itself a victim of man's tunnel vision with regard to technology, while what's going on in the foreground, an exercise in demiurgy, seems slightly superficial and tacked on. 'Snare' is one of the highlights of the collection, the story of seemingly ordinary Dave, who every year on a certain day follows a specific ritual that relates back to his youthful involvement with a band on the make and the enchanting Alyss. With keenly felt emotions and song lyrics used to enhance the narrative, 'Snare' is a story that captures all the nuances of lost hope and lost love, the pitfalls that we dig for our own future selves, while at the same time offering a thoroughly jaundiced view of the music industry and fame of the five minute variety. In

contrast 'The Dead Monkey Puzzle', another story in which reality and fantasy collide head on, is a short and savage foray into the realms of brutality, as an innocent young woman is raped and tortured by three thrill seekers. The personalities of the men are cleverly conveyed through the use of dialogue, which affords a telling counterpoint to the inner life of their victim, so strongly felt that it spills over into our own world. This is the most powerful story in the book, and totally harrowing in terms of the events it portrays.

Fantasy 'All the Best Curses Last for a Lifetime' is slightly reminiscent of Dunsany in its depiction of an all powerful magician living in an impregnable castle, but the story of how he got to be who he is and the role he must play in the world is a fascinating dissection of the nature of good and evil. In 'The Machine It Was That Cried' an astronaut must learn to deal with the true nature of his partner on a voyage that lasts a lifetime. Thematically this story is standard SF fare, asking all the usual questions about what it means to be human, but Grant's prose is never less than engaging and the sensitivity that informs the text enables it to sidestep all the clichés inherent in the scenario. 'Coma' is the weakest of what's on offer, a story about a girl who comes out of a coma and discovers the universal chord which I found somewhat confusing and with a point that sadly eluded me, while in 'Mouse' two scientists who are trapped in an alien labyrinth must make an accommodation to save themselves, a very clever story with solid characterisation and convincing interaction between the two leads.

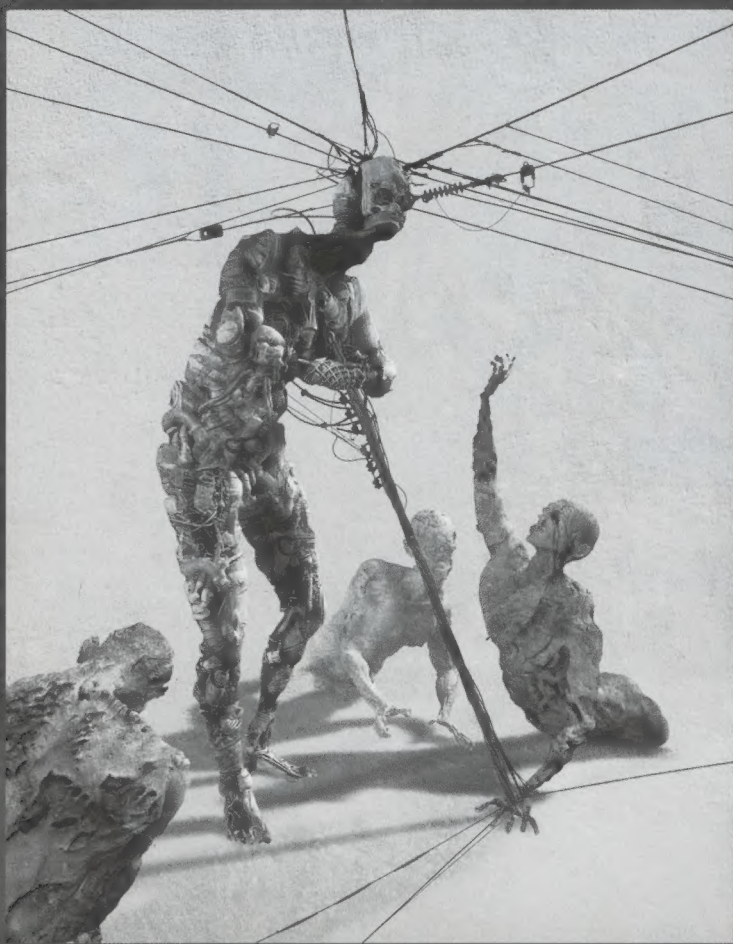
'How I Slept with Queen of China', another highlight in a collection that has plenty of those, is a rite of passage piece in which a young man who, in a fit of bravado, has bet his mates that he can pull the local barmaid instead comes to relate to her as a human being, marking his own entry into adulthood. 'Imogen' has a character from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* looking back on her lives and loves, all of which have a fantastical element. The story is well written and intriguing with its hints of lycanthropy and metamorphosis, but I suspect my appreciation was seriously hampered by ignorance of the source material. Finally in 'Me Topia', a delightful three pager which sits like a coda at the end of the book, a chance meeting in a pub has transformational consequences for one of the parties involved.

John Grant does indeed take no prisoners with this collection of fine stories, but readers could do far worse than to allow themselves to be captivated by his vivid imagination and dazzling prose.

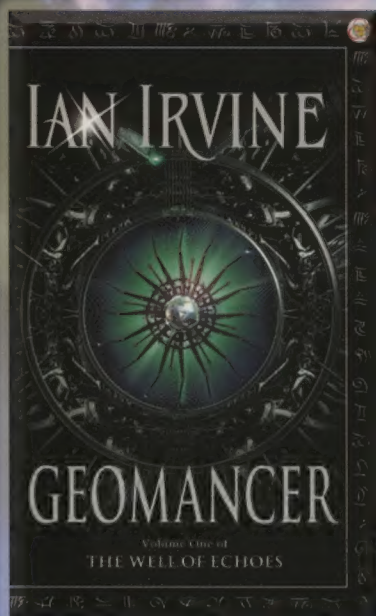
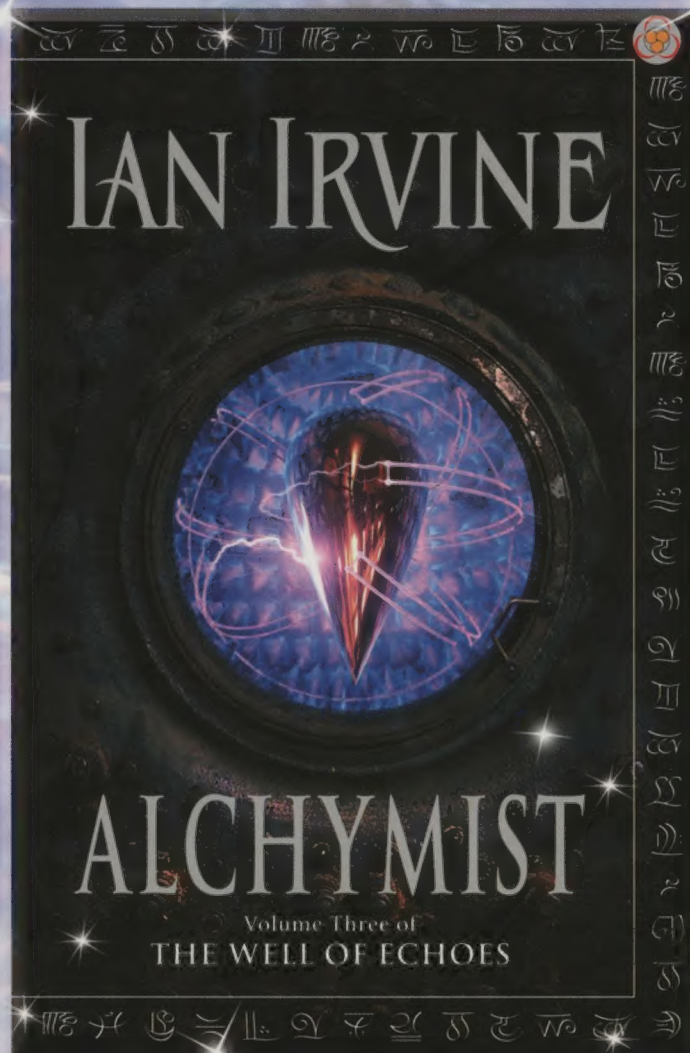


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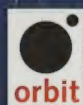
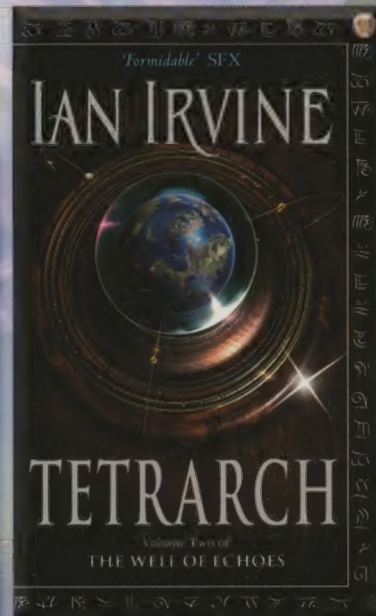
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